

7 SOCIOLOGICAL MAINSTREAM THEORIES



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 7.1 Define anomie and discuss how it is used in various sociological theories to describe causes of crime.
- 7.2 Provide examples of social process theories and criminality as a learned or culturally transmitted process.
- 7.3 Discuss how society maintains or elicits social control and criminality as deviance within the context of social control theories.
- 7.4 Summarize how criminality changes over the life course.
- 7.5 Identify the connection between sociological mainstream theories and crime policy.

Positive criminology accounts for too much delinquency. Taken at their terms, delinquency [crime] theories seem to predicate far more delinquency than actually occurs. If delinquents were in fact radically different from the rest of conventional youth . . . then involvement in delinquency would be more permanent and less transient, more pervasive and less intermittent than is apparently the case. Theories of delinquency yield an embarrassment of riches, which seemingly go unmatched in the real world.

—David Matza (1964)

The early classical, biological, and psychological traditions in criminology theory were similar in their relatively conservative view of society (the consensus model) as well as in their search for the cause of crime in the lack of fear of deterrence, defective individual genetics, or the psyche. The individual criminal was the unit of analysis. The only departures from this deviant behavior approach to criminality were found in the writings of the economic theorists (Marx and Bonger) and the ecologists (Quetelet and Guerry). Economic and ecological theories constitute the groundwork for the preeminence of sociological approaches to criminological theory beginning in the 1930s in the United States. Societal conditions, groups, social disorganization, and conflict have become additional units of analysis. Crime is perceived as a status (definition) as well as a behavior (pathology), and sociological criminology in general takes a more critical stance toward the society itself as a generator of criminal conduct.

In the 1930s, American criminology took on a different path from the classical and positivist schools of Criminology (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2015, p. 7). Moving from a deviant behavior approach that asks why do individuals deviate from societal norms, the focus switched to social disorganization. This asks what social conditions cause crime. The Chicago *school of criminology* arose to study urban areas and crime.

The Depression of the 1930s led to the breakdown of social controls, the rise of criminal traditions, and barriers to the American dream of success (Lilly et al., 2015, p. 18). At this time, three core ways of explaining crime emerged: (1) crime takes place when social controls break down, (2) differential association theory where individuals learn definitions favorable to criminal conduct, and (3) anomie-strain theory where crime takes place when people are blocked in their efforts to achieve success. The three mainstream theories were called that because they were not radical or extreme in their analysis or in their policy prescriptions. They favored reform of the status quo rather than their radical transformation (Lilly et al., 2015, p. 9).

[Table 7.1](#) is a more detailed outline of the sociological theories that were briefly presented in Table 5.1, Major Theoretical Approaches in Criminology. These include mainstream sociological theories: anomie, social process, social control, and developmental and life course theories.

Discussion begins with the mainstream tradition and the views of late 19th-century sociologist Émile Durkheim and the anomie theories that he inspired. Other representatives of this approach are Robert Merton, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, and Albert Cohen.

Table 7.1 Major Theoretical Approaches in Mainstream Criminology (Sociological)^a

Theoretical School	Major Themes/Concepts	Major Theorists
Sociological mainstream	Crime reflects consensus mode	
Anomie theory	Anomie (normlessness) lessens social control	Durkheim
	Anomie (gap between goals and means) creates deviance	Merton
	Differential social opportunity	Cloward and Ohlin
	Lower-class reaction to middle-class values	Cohen
Social process	Social disorganization and social conditions	Shaw and McKay
	Routine activities	Cohen and Felson
	Crime is learned behavior, culturally/subculturally transmitted	Sutherland
	Local concerns of lower class	Miller
	Subterranean values, drift techniques of neutralization	Matza

Social control	Containment theory	Reckless
	Social bonds weakened, reducing individual stakes in conformity	Hirschi
	Low self-control and self-interest	Gottfredson and Hirschi
Developmental/life course	Antisocial potential	Farrington
	Longitudinal studies	Blumstein
	Life course criminality	Sampson and Laub

^a See Table 8.1 for other theoretical approaches in criminology.

ANOMIE THEORIES

Anomie: Émile Durkheim

The writings of French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) were in sharp contrast to the social Darwinist, individualist, and psychological and biological positivist theories dominant in the late 19th century. The works of Durkheim represented a return to the thinking and orientation of the statistical and ecological theories advocated by Quetelet and Guerry, an approach that had been preempted by the popularity of Lombroso and the early biological positivists.

In his works, which included *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964), originally published in 1893, and *Suicide* (1951), first released in 1897, Durkheim insisted on the primacy of groups and social organizations as explanatory factors of human misconduct. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), he viewed crime as a normal phenomenon in society because group reactions to deviant actions assist human groups in defining their moral boundaries. In his doctoral dissertation, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1950), which was completed in 1893, Durkheim defined the sociologist's role as that of a systematic observer of social facts, empirically observable group characteristics that affect human behavior. Durkheim's analysis of suicide clearly demonstrated his hypothesis of group influences on individual propensity to suicide. In *Suicide*, he identified several types, which included altruistic ("selfless" suicide), egoistic (self-centered suicide), and anomic (suicide due to anomie or a state of normlessness in society). The latter concept is Durkheim's principal contribution to the field of criminology.

The term [anomie](#) appeared in the English language as early as 1591 and generally referred to a disregard for law (V. Fox, 1976). Anomie, from the Greek *anomia* ("without norms"), as used by Durkheim involves a moral malaise, a lack of clear-cut norms with which to guide human conduct (normlessness). It may occur as a pervasive condition because of a failure of individuals to internalize the norms of society, an inability to adjust to changing norms, or even conflict within the norms themselves.

Anomie

a moral confusion or breakdown in mores or a gap between goals and means in society.



Photo 7.1 The American dream is not available to all. This pregnant woman sits on the sidewalk with a sign asking for help while passersby shop near Beverly Hills, California.

Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images

Social trends in modern urban-industrial societies result in changing norms, confusion, and lessened social control over the individual. Individualism increases and new lifestyles emerge, perhaps yielding even greater freedom but also increasing the possibility for deviant behavior. The close ties of the individual to the family, village, and tradition (what Durkheim calls

mechanical solidarity), although confining to the individual, maintained social control. In modern societies (characterized by organic solidarity), constraints on the individual weaken. In a theme that would influence many later criminological theories, Durkheim (1897/1951) viewed anomie in modern societies as produced by individual aspirations and ambitions and the search for new pleasures and sensations that are beyond achievement even in times of prosperity.

This notion of anomie would influence a number of criminological theories, constituting a theoretical school of thought within mainstream or conventional criminology that began with the work of Robert Merton in the late 1930s and continued with Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, as well as Albert Cohen, in the post-World War II period. Chronologically preceding these later developments in the anomie tradition were the work of the Chicago school of sociology and another major approach, the social process school of thought. These theories were less concerned with the origin of crime in society and concentrated instead on the social process (learning, socialization, subcultural transmission) by which criminal values were transmitted to individuals by groups with which they were affiliated.

Merton's Theory of Anomie

As part of the jointly sponsored American Society of Criminology and Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences' (2004) Criminology and Criminal Justice Oral History Project, Robert Merton described how he developed some of his theories. He was interested in examining "what is it about our society and cultural institutions, not just individual characteristics such as feeble-mindedness, that causes deviance?" (n.p.). There is a dysfunction between the American dream (a cultural value) of success and social structure (means of achieving). Class and ethnic structures provided differential access. Merton wanted to look at deviance in addition to conformity in society and explain differential rates. Functionalism had concentrated on positive functions of things, and so he wanted to explore their dysfunctions.

Merton's biography is very interesting. He was the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. His original name was Meyer R. Schkolnick, and he was raised in the slums of Philadelphia. After winning a college scholarship to Temple University, he received a graduate assistantship to Harvard (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2015, p. 71).



Photo 7.2 J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, has had a "rags to riches" experience. She went from living on welfare to becoming a multimillionaire within 5 years.

Toby Canham/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

Robert Merton's theory of anomie first appeared in 1938 in an article titled "Social Structure and Anomie." Modifying Durkheim's original concept, Merton (1949/1957) viewed anomie as a condition that occurs when discrepancies exist between societal goals and the means available for their achievement. This discrepancy or "strain" between aspirations and achievement has resulted in Merton's conception being referred to as strain theory. According to this theory, U.S. society is firm in judging people's social worth on the basis of their apparent material success and in preaching that success is available to all who work hard and take advantage of available opportunities. In reality, the opportunities or means of achieving success ("the American dream") are not available to all. Merton (1938) states,

It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common symbols of success for the population at large while its social structure rigorously restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these symbols for a considerable part of the same population, that antisocial behavior ensues on a considerable scale. (p. 78)

Thus, according to Merton's theory of anomie, antisocial behavior (crime) is produced by the very values of the society itself in encouraging high material aspirations as a sign of individual success without adequately providing approved means for all to reach these goals. This discrepancy between goals and means (strain) produces various **modes of personality adaptation**, different combinations of behavior in accepting or rejecting the means and goals. Given this high premium placed on individual success without concomitant provision of adequate means for its achievement, individuals may seek alternate (nonapproved) means of accomplishing this goal. American fiction, the Horatio Alger stories of rags to riches, the media, and other literature constantly pound home the theme of success. Social Darwinism (the theme that the capable or fit will succeed) and the Protestant work ethic (the attachment of religious value to work) have been persistent philosophies. These values are generally accepted by persons of all social classes.

Modes of personality

adaptation part of Merton's theory of anomie that results in personality adaptations: conformist, innovator, ritualist, retreatist, and rebel.

One of the essential premises of this approach is that organization and disorganization in society are not mutually exclusive, but rather, many of the cultural values that have desirable consequences (manifest functions) often contain within them or produce undesirable consequences (latent functions; Merton, 1961).

Modes of Personality Adaptation

Merton describes five possible modes of personality adaptation that represent types of adjustments to societal means and goals: the conformist, the innovator, the ritualist, the retreatist, and the rebel. All except the conformist are deviant responses. The *conformist* accepts the goal of success in society and also the societally approved means of achieving this status, such as through hard work, education, deferred gratification, and the like. Acceptance of the goals does not indicate that all actually achieve such satisfactory ends but that they have faith in the system.

The *innovator* accepts the goal of success but rejects or seeks illegitimate alternatives to the means of achieving these aims. Criminal activities such as theft and organized crime could serve as examples, although societally encouraged activities such as inventing could also provide illustrations. An interesting example is the case of Fred Demara Jr., well known through the book *The Great Imposter* (Crichton, 1959). A high school graduate, Demara was disappointed that people had to spend much of their lives preparing usually for only one occupation. Forging credentials and identities, he launched into careers as a college professor, Trappist monk, penitentiary warden, and surgeon in the Canadian Navy, to mention just a few.

The *ritualist* is illustrated by the "mindless bureaucrat" who becomes so caught up in rules and means to an end that he or she tends to forget or fails to place proper significance on the goal. This individual will compulsively persist in going through the motions with little hope of successful achievement of goals.

The *retreatist* represents a rejection of both societally approved means and ends. This adaptation might be illustrated by the advice of Timothy Leary, the prophet of psychedelic drugs in the 1960s, who preached, "tune in, turn on, and drop out." Chronic alcoholics and drug addicts may eventually reject societal standards of jobs and success and choose the goal of getting high by means of begging, borrowing, or stealing.

The *rebel* rejects both means and goals and seeks to substitute alternative ones that would represent new societal goals as well as new methods of achieving them, such as through revolutionary activities aimed at introducing change in the existing order outside normal, societally approved channels.

A Critique of Merton's Theory

Merton's theory, well received in sociology and in criminology, became the basis of a number of subcultural theories of delinquency, to be discussed shortly. Criticisms of the theory include the following:

- His assumption of uniform commitment to materialistic goals ignores the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of U.S. cultural values.
- The theory appears to dwell on lower-class criminality, thus failing to consider lawbreaking among the elite. Taylor et al. (1973) express this point: "Anomie theory stands accused of predicting too little bourgeois criminality and too much proletarian criminality" (p. 107).
- The theory is primarily oriented toward explaining monetary or materialistically oriented crime and does not address violent criminal activity.
- If Merton is correct, why does the United States now have lower property crime rates than many other developed countries?

Although many writers (Hirschi, 1969; R. E. Johnson, 1979; Kornhauser, 1978) have concluded that Merton's theory does not hold up empirically, later research by Farnworth and Leiber (1989) argues in favor of its durability. They indicate that strain (anomie) theory combines psychological and structural explanations for crime and thus avoids purely individualistic explanations and that the research of the critics failed to examine the gap or strain between economic goals and educational means. Farnworth and Leiber (1989) found this a significant educational predictor of delinquency in their sample of juveniles and concluded that the theory is "a viable and promising theory of delinquency and crime" (p. 273).

Classic strain theory (as it is sometimes called, given the strain or discrepancy between goals and means) has had additional conflicting support. Research did not find higher delinquency among those with the greatest gap between aspirations and expectations. Those with low aspirations and low expectations had the highest offense rates. Other studies, however, have shown support (Agnew, Cullen, Burton, Evans, & Dunaway, 1996; Cullen & Agnew, 2003).

There have been a variety of efforts to revise strain theory. One revision involves using the concept of relative deprivation, one's felt sense of deprivation relative to others, such as a reference group. Another alteration is to view adolescents as pursuing a number of goals besides those involving money and status. These might include popularity with peers and romantic partners, good grades, athletic prowess, and even positive relationships with parents (Agnew et al., 1996; Cullen & Agnew, 2003).

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST)

A persistent writer in the strain tradition has been Robert Agnew (1992, 1995, 1997). He views strain as due to negative relationships in which individuals feel that they are being mistreated. These negative relationships may take a variety of forms: others preventing the achievement of goals such as monetary success; activities that threaten to remove valued relationships, such as the loss or death of a significant other; and the threat of negatively valued stimuli such as insults or physical assault. For some, such activities increase the likelihood for anger and frustration, as well as the likelihood that crime becomes a means of resolving these emotions. In other words, if a person experiences a form of strain and responds with negative emotionality without having good coping resources, he or she is more likely than others to engage in crime. Strains are most likely to result in offending when they are high in magnitude, are viewed as being unjust, are linked to low social control, and can be resolved through offending (Agnew, 2001). Agnew's contribution to theory was to specify that Merton's theory was limited. Agnew (1992) saw Merton as identifying one type of criminogenic strain relationships that prevent an individual from achieving valued goals such as economic success and status. Agnew identified other negative relations that create strain and called this general strain theory. These include status frustration experienced by students with their peers, being physically abused by a peer, or having a serious argument with a family member (Lilly et al., 2015, p. 77). Agnew and White (1992) claimed that delinquency was higher among those experiencing negative life events, for example, parental divorce or financial problems. It was also higher for those with interactional problems with teachers, parents, and others. Why some react to the strain by committing crime and others do not still needs to be specified.



Photo 7.3 According to Cohen, crime and delinquency among lower-class youth is a reaction against middle-class values.

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Agnew (1992, 1994) has revised traditional anomie (strain) theory by going beyond Merton's presumed economic strain and identifying other sources of strain. His general strain theory (GST) views strain as a more general phenomenon than the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations. Strain can also take place when others take something of value from us or when one is confronted with negative circumstances. A psychological state of negative affect is critical and includes disappointment, frustration, and anger. Delinquency becomes a means to regain what one has lost or been prevented from obtaining (instrumental), retaliatory (a means of striking back), or escapist (a means of getting away from anger and strain). Thus, Agnew identifies three major types of strain. In addition, other types of strain may

- prevent one from achieving positively valued goals,
- remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or
- present or threaten to present one with noxious or negatively valued stimuli.

In a test of GST, Paternoster and Mazerolle (1999) obtained mixed findings. Negative relationships with adults, dissatisfaction with friends, and school life and stress were related to delinquency. Such strain may, however, be managed by other strategies such as drug use, compensatory success in school, athletics, or afterschool jobs. Strain does weaken conventional social bonds and strengthen unconventional bonds.

An extension of Merton's theory has been offered by Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld in their *Crime and the American Dream* (2013) and their institutional anomie theory. The hunger for wealth is viewed as insatiable, and all social institutions become subservient to the economic structure. Culturally induced pressure to accumulate material rewards combined with weak controls by noneconomic institutions produces an institutionalization of anomie (Chamlin & Cochran, 1995) and an institutionalization of the use of deviant means for success. The unimpeded pursuit of monetary success is the American dream. Economic institutions predominate, subordinating all other institutions such as the family, church, or school, reducing their power particularly in the socialization of children.

Subcultural Theories

Merton's modification of Durkheim's notion of anomie began the anomie tradition in U.S. criminology, with further influential theoretical work by writers such as Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, as well as Albert Cohen, that directed itself toward [subcultural theories](#) of delinquency.

Subcultural theories

theories that view the type of crime as due to various forms of delinquent subcultures.

Merton's theory had a major impact on many of the more sociologically oriented theories of crime and delinquency. A major area of theoretical focus from the 1930s through the 1960s in U.S. criminology related to juvenile gangs, as studies of citations in criminology textbooks (Schichor, 1982) and frequently cited books and journal articles (Wolfgang, 1980) from that era show.

LEARNING CHECK 7.1

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 475.

1. **Fill in the Blank:** The _____ mode of adaptation occurs when a person responds to strain by continuing to do his or her job without thought or much hope of achieving the American dream.
2. **True or False?** The type of strain identified by Merton is what occurs when a child experiences noxious stimuli, such as child abuse.
3. **Fill in the Blank:** According to Agnew's general strain theory, when strain is experienced and then a person responds with _____, offending is likely to occur.
4. **True or False?** Agnew's general strain theory includes three forms of strain.

Cohen's Lower-Class Reaction Theory

Albert Cohen was an undergraduate student of Robert Merton and later a graduate teaching assistant for Edwin Sutherland at Indiana University. In the Oral History Project tapes (American Society of Criminology & Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, 2004), he explains that, despite having been a 1939 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Harvard, he had been turned down for aid in graduate schools because he was Jewish. He even received a letter from a department chair of a state university saying it was not their policy to hire Jews. Fortunately, Sutherland had offered him a teaching assistantship at Indiana.

Albert Cohen's (1955) *Delinquent Boys* presents a theory about lower-class subcultural delinquency. According to his [lower-class reaction theory](#), delinquency is a lower-class reaction to middle-class values. Lower-class youth use delinquent subcultures as a means of reacting against a middle-class-dominated value system in a society that unintentionally discriminates against them because of their lower-class lifestyles and values. Unable to live up to or accept middle-class values and judgments, they seek self-esteem by rejecting these values. Cohen carefully qualifies his remarks by indicating that this theory is not intended to describe all juvenile crime.

Lower-class reaction theory

Cohen's theory that delinquency involves a lower-class reaction to unachievable middle-class values.

He views much lower-class delinquency as nonutilitarian, malicious, and negativistic. Much theft, for instance, is nonutilitarian, performed for status purposes within the gang rather than out of need. Maliciousness is expressed in a general disdain for middle-class values or objects and a negative reaction to such values. The delinquent gang substitutes its own values and sources of self-esteem for the middle-class values it rejects. Some examples of middle-class values include ambition, individual responsibility, verbal skills, academic achievement, deferred gratification (postponement of rewards), middle-class manners, nonviolence, wholesome recreation, and the like. The gang subculture, as depicted in [Photos 7.4](#) and [7.5](#), offers a means of protection and of striking back against values and behavioral expectations the lower-class youth are unable to fulfill.

A Critique of Cohen's Theory

Major criticisms of Cohen's theory relate to

- His overconcentration on lower (working)-class delinquency
- His assumption that lower-class boys are interested in middle-class values (Kitsuse & Dietrick, 1970)
- The fact that, like other subcultural theorists, he fails to address ethnic, family, and other sources of stress as well as the recreational ("fun") aspects of gang membership (Bordua, 1962)
- His emphasis on the nonutilitarian nature of many delinquent activities, which tends to underplay the rational, for-profit nature of some juvenile criminal activities

Cohen's theory fits into the anomie tradition in that he views lower-class delinquency and gang membership as a result of strain or a reaction to unfulfilled aspirations. A related subcultural theory by Walter Miller disagrees with this strain hypothesis and argues instead, in the social process tradition of Shaw, McKay, and Sutherland, that lower-class delinquency represents a process of learning and expressing values of one's membership group. Miller's theory is discussed in detail shortly.

Cloward and Ohlin's Differential Opportunity Theory

An extension of the works of both Merton and Sutherland (to be discussed) appeared in Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (1960). According to their **differential opportunity theory**, working-class juveniles will choose one or another type of subcultural (gang) adjustment to their anomic situation depending on the availability of illegitimate opportunity structures in their neighborhood. Borrowing from Merton's theme, Cloward and Ohlin view the pressure to join delinquent subcultures as originating from discrepancies between culturally induced aspirations among lower-class youth and available means of achieving them through legitimate channels. In addition to legitimate channels, Cloward and Ohlin stress the importance of available illegitimate opportunities, which may also be limited, depending on the neighborhood. Neighborhoods with highly organized rackets provide upward mobility in the illegal opportunity structure. Individuals occupy positions in both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures, both of which may be limited. Illegitimate opportunities are dependent on locally available criminal traditions.

Differential opportunity theory

Cloward and Ohlin's theory that crime takes place due to a lack of legitimate opportunity and is also due to the availability of illegitimate opportunities.

Delinquent Subcultures

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) identified three types of illegitimate juvenile subcultures: criminal, conflict, and retreatist. The criminal subculture occurs in stable neighborhoods in which a hierarchy of available criminal opportunities exists. Such a means of adaptation substitutes theft, extortion, and property offenses as the means of achieving success. Disorganized areas (ones undergoing invasion-succession or turnover of ethnic groups) are characterized by a conflict subculture. Such groups, denied both legitimate and illegitimate sources of access to status, resort to violence, "defense of turf," "bopping," or "the rumble" as a means of gaining a "bad rep" or prestige. The retreatist subculture is viewed by Cloward and Ohlin as made up of "double failures." Unable to succeed either in the legitimate or illegitimate opportunity structures, such individuals reject both the legitimate means and ends and simply drop out; lacking criminal opportunity, they seek status through kicks and highs of drug abuse. These subcultures become the individual's reference group and primary source of self-esteem. According to this theory, delinquent gang members do not generally reject the societal goal of success but, lacking proper means to achieve it, seek other opportunities.

A Critique of Differential Opportunity Theory

Cloward and Ohlin's theory, building as it had on other respected theories, was well received in the field of criminology. Criticisms of the theory have generally involved the following:

- This theory focused exclusively on delinquent gangs and youth from lower- and working-class backgrounds, ignoring, for instance, middle-class delinquent subcultures.
- It is doubtful that delinquent subcultures fall into only the three categories they identified. In fact, much shifting of membership and activities among members appears common (Bordua, 1961; Schrag, 1962).
- The orientation and specialization of delinquent gangs, even if the analysis is restricted to the United States, appear far more complex and varied than their theory accounts for.

Despite criticism, Cloward and Ohlin's ideas were very influential in the field and comprised a broader theory than that of Albert Cohen (1955). Where Cloward and Ohlin viewed delinquency as an anomic reaction to goals, means discrepancy, and the particular form of adaptation

dependent on available illegitimate opportunities, Cohen perceived delinquency as a reaction of lower-class youth to unobtainable middle-class values.

The implications of Cloward and Ohlin's theory were not lost on policy makers. By improving legitimate opportunities, delinquency could be controlled. Then-attorney general Robert Kennedy read *Delinquency and Opportunity* and was impressed. He asked Lloyd Ohlin to assist in drafting legislation that resulted in the passage of the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1961. Such community action programs later became the basis of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty (Vold et al., 2002).

LEARNING CHECK 7.2

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 476.

1. **Fill in the Blank:** _____ viewed delinquency as a lower-class reaction to middle-class values.
2. **True or False?** Cloward and Ohlin argue in their differential opportunity theory that working-class youth choose how to adjust to anomic conditions depending on opportunity structures available in their neighborhood.
3. **True or False?** Both Cohen's and Cloward and Ohlin's theories could be classified as social process theories.

SOCIAL PROCESS THEORIES

Social process theories emphasize criminality as a learned or culturally transmitted process and are presented as an outgrowth of the Chicago school of sociology in the works of Henry Shaw and David McKay, Edwin Sutherland, Walter Miller, and David Matza.



Applying Theory 7.1

Recall the terrible story of Aileen Wuornos from [Chapter 5](#), page 134. Using this case study, apply one of the anomie theories to explain why she killed seven men.

Remember to consider the following:

1. What types of crimes does the theory explain? You would only want to select a theory that can explain violent crime for the case of Aileen Wuornos.
2. To whom does the theory apply? If theory only explains crimes by youth, it would not be appropriate for explaining why Aileen Wuornos committed crime.
3. According to the theory, what are the main causes of crime? That is, what are the theory's propositions? Once you have identified these propositions, you must see how they apply (or not) to your case. In this instance, the propositions must be something applicable to Aileen Wuornos.
4. Explain how the theory can be used by using its propositions and how the causes of crime apply to the case, Aileen Wuornos.

The Chicago School

In 1892, the first American academic program in sociology was begun at the University of Chicago, marking the inception of sociology's [Chicago school](#). Names associated with this school would constitute a virtual Camelot of sociology: Park, Burgess, Wirth, Shaw, McKay, Thrasher, Zorbaugh, Anderson, Mead, Faris, Dunham, Thomas, Znaniecki, Cressey, and Sutherland, to mention just a few. Originally begun by sociologist Albion Small, the school would have a primary influence on the development of sociology as a distinctive American discipline in the 1920s and 1930s with Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth as the primary mentors. This group would develop a comprehensive theoretical system of urban ecology that would generate a remarkable number of urban life studies (M. R. Stein, 1964).

Chicago school

a school of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s that produced many urban ecological and ethnographic studies of Chicago.

Human Ecology

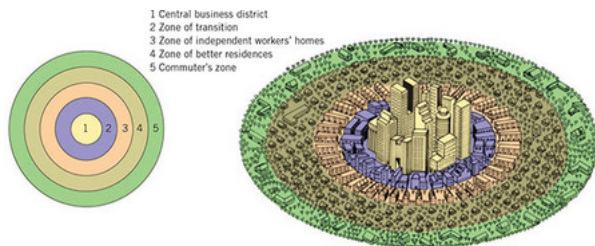
Like Durkheim, R. E. Park (1952) saw that freedom from group constraints often also entailed freedom from group supports. Whereas Durkheim referred to this as anomie, Park used the notion of individualization due to mobility. Ecology is a field that examines the interrelationship between human organisms and environment. Park's theory was based on [human ecology](#)—looking at humans and the environment and, more specifically, at urban ecology, viewing the city as a growing organism, heavily employing analogies from plant ecology. According to Park, the heterogeneous contact of racial and ethnic groups in the city often leads to competition for status and space, as well as conflict, accommodation, acculturation, assimilation, or amalgamation—terms all quite similar to concepts in botany (plant biology), such as segregation, invasion, succession, and dispersion. One of Park's key notions was that of [natural areas](#), subcommunities that emerge to serve specific, specialized functions. They are called "natural" because they are unplanned and serve to order the functions and needs of diverse populations within the city. Natural areas provide institutions and organizations places to socialize its inhabitants and to provide for social control. Such natural areas include ports of embarkation, E. W. Burgess's (1925) zone of transition, ghettos, bohemias, hoboheimas, and the like. Burgess's concentric zone theory, which views cities as growing outward in concentric rings, served as the graphic model for the Chicago school's theory of human ecology. [Figure 7.1](#) presents Burgess's concentric zone theory.

Human ecology

the study of the interrelationship between human organisms and the physical environment.

Natural areas

according to the Chicago school, these are subcommunities that emerge to serve specific, specialized functions.



Description

Figure 7.1 Burgess's Concentric Zone Theory

Source: Rubenstein, James M., *Contemporary Human Geography*, 3rd ed. Copyright © 2016. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.

Wirth's (1938) theory of urbanism as a way of life viewed the transition from the rural to the urban way of life as producing social disorganization, marginality, anonymity, anomie, and alienation because of the heterogeneity, freedom, and loneliness of urban life. The Chicago school expressed an antiurban bias in its analysis and nostalgia for the small midwestern towns where most of its theorists had originated.

Using R. E. Park's concept of natural areas as a building block, Chicago school students were enjoined to perform case studies of these areas to generate hypotheses as well as, it was hoped, generalizations. Park (1952) expressed this hope:

The natural areas of the city, it appears from what has been said, may be made to serve an important methodological function. They constitute, taken together, what Hobson has described as "a frame of reference," a conceptual order within which statistical facts gain a new and more general significance. They not only tell us what the facts are in regard to conditions in any given region, but insofar as they

characterize an area that is natural and typical, they establish a working hypothesis in regard to other areas of the same kind. (p. 198)

This empirical orientation, as opposed to armchair theorizing, was the chief contribution of the Chicago school. Among the students inspired to perform field research were Clifford Shaw and David McKay, as well as Edwin Sutherland.

Shaw and McKay's Social Disorganization Theory

Ironically, although Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay are pointed to as members of the Chicago school, they never enjoyed faculty status at the University of Chicago but performed their research while employed by the Illinois Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago. Snodgrass (1972) indicates that neither Shaw nor McKay received his doctorate because of foreign language requirements, but they worked closely with many faculty and students from the university (J. T. Carey, 1975). The lasting contribution of Shaw and McKay's ecological studies in the 1930s was their basic premise that crime is due more to social disorganization in pathological environments than to the deviant behavior of abnormal individuals (Gibbons, 1979).

In the tradition of the statistical school of criminological theory, Shaw and McKay made extensive use of maps and official statistics to plot the ecological distribution of forms in their [social disorganization theory](#), such as juvenile delinquency (C. R. Shaw, 1929; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Using Burgess's concentric zone theory as a schema, as well as Park's notion of natural areas, they were able to document the ecological impact on human behavior. For instance, one transitional area (an area undergoing invasion/succession) was shown to exhibit very high crime rates despite considerable change in its ethnic makeup. Such areas breed criminogenic influences that predispose occupants to crime and social disorganization. In other research, Shaw used ethnographic and autobiographical field methods to provide case studies of criminals and delinquents (C. R. Shaw, 1930; Shaw, McKay, & McDonald, 1938). Imposing concentric circles on mapped areas of Chicago on which rates of social disorganization had been plotted, Shaw (1930) was able to demonstrate the highest rates of truancy, crime, delinquency, and recidivism in Zone II (area of transition), and such rates declined as one moved farther out from the rings. Criminal attitudes and social pathology were viewed as culturally transmitted within the social environment. That is, in transitional zones, there is little neighborhood organization. Institutions like the family are strained and thus are unable to sufficiently perform social control functions. Thus, youth lack control and supervision. These youth may then band together or seek networks of older, criminal residents and then adopt criminal values.

Social disorganization theory

Shaw and McKay's theory that crime is due to social disorganization and social breakdown of an area.

A Critique of Social Disorganization Theory

The human ecologists' insistence on ecological and social conditions having criminogenic impacts on otherwise normal individuals would inspire later criminologists such as Sutherland. Their stress on field studies and an empirical orientation would provide credibility to the fledgling disciplines of sociology and criminology and win them greater academic acceptance. A number of shortcomings, however, have been identified:

- Their theories at times border on ecological determinism, asserting that an area or physical environment causes social pathology. Concentration on the geophysical environment tends to make the social structure and institutions secondary.
- The attempt to borrow an organic analogy and adapt biological concepts, such as competition, invasion, succession, and the like, to criminology saddled the field with unnecessarily primitive concepts.
- Some of the studies tend to commit the [ecological fallacy](#) (Robinson, 1950), in which group rates are used to describe individual behavior. Aggregate statistics do not yield accurate estimates if the intended unit of analysis is the behavior of individuals.

- Although Shaw and McKay studied other cities, the theories and conceptions of the Chicago school (such as the concentric growth of cities) were perhaps applicable to Chicago, a city undergoing fantastic urbanization during the 1920s and 1930s, but may not apply to other urban communities, particularly since the post–World War II period.
- These theories assume stable ecological areas, which in fact do not exist. Such areas disappeared in the post–World War II decentralization of urban areas (Bursik, 1988; Schurman & Kobrin, 1986).
- Problems in operationalizing (measuring) key concepts, such as delinquency rate and disorganization, arise when there is a heavy reliance on official statistics (Pfohl, 1985).
- There is an overemphasis on consensus in community and a lack of appreciation of political conflict (Bursik, 1988).

Ecological fallacy

a problem in which group rates are used to describe individual behavior.

In defense of Shaw and McKay, Brantingham and Brantingham (1984) point out that they were not as guilty of falling into the ecological fallacy trap as many of their followers because they supplemented many of their statistical studies with case studies. This was illustrated by ethnographic works such as Shaw et al.'s *Brothers in Crime* (1938) and Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* (1930). Focusing on group or social process, urban ecologists Shaw and McKay in particular were influential in shifting criminological analysis from an overconcentration on the individual deviant and instead toward the criminogenic influences of social environments.

Routine Activities Approach

A resurgence and rediscovery of interest in the ecological and social disorganization theories of crime occurred as a result of formulations such as Cohen and Felson's (1979) and Felson's (1983) routine activities approach to crime causation. This approach says that "the volume of criminal offenses will be related to the nature of normal everyday patterns of interaction. . . . There is a symbiotic relationship between legal and illegal activities" (Messner & Tardiff, 1985, pp. 241–242). In summarizing the routine activities approach, Felson (1987) indicates,

(1) It specifies three earthly elements of crime: a likely offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian against crime. (2) It considers how everyday life assembles these three elements in space and time. (3) It shows that a proliferation of lightweight durable goods and a dispersion of activities away from family and household could account quite well for the crime wave in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s without fancier explanations. Indeed modern society invites high crime rates by offering a multitude of illegal opportunities. (p. 911)

Koenig (1991) explains that one of the origins of this theory was the Hindelang et al. (1977) lifestyle exposure theory, which proposes that the probability of crime varies by time, place, and social setting. An individual's lifestyle places him or her in social settings with higher or lower probabilities of crime. For a more thorough description of routine activities theory and lifestyle exposure theory, see [Chapter 4](#).

Other works that illustrate the reaffirmation of social disorganization theory are by Simcha-Fagan and Schwartz (1986), who include social disorganization and subcultural approaches in explaining urban delinquency. Similarly, Byrne and Sampson (1986) indicate that the social-ecological model is based on the premise that community has independent impacts on crime that are not able to be separated from the individual level. G. White (1990) found that neighborhood burglary rates varied by highway accessibility; ease of entry increases both familiarity with escape routes and vulnerability. In "Deviant Places," Stark (1987) argues that "kinds of places" explanations are needed in criminology in addition to the "kinds of people" explanations. He codified 30 propositions from over a century of ecological explanations of both the Chicago school and the moral statisticians of the 19th century.

Stark identified five aspects of high-deviance areas: density, poverty, mixed use, transience, and dilapidation. These elements create criminogenic conditions for crime. His propositions included that density is associated with interaction between least and most deviant populations, higher moral cynicism, overcrowding, outdoor gatherings, lower levels of

supervision of children, poorer school achievement, lower stakes in conformity, and increased deviant behavior. Crowding will increase family conflict, decrease the ability to shield wrongdoing, and thus increase moral cynicism. Although Stark's hypotheses are too numerous to cover here, his systematic extraction of propositions from over a century of social disorganization and ecological research represented a reaffirmation and resurgence of such literature (see also Taylor & Harrell, 1996). [Criminology in Context 7.1](#) reports on environmental crime prevention and "designing out" crime.

LEARNING CHECK 7.3

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 476.

1. According to the work by Burgess on concentric zones, which zone has the conditions that are prone to produce crime?
2. **True or False?** According to Shaw and McKay, areas that are socially disorganized are unlikely to produce crime.
3. **True or False?** Routine activities theory proposes that the increase in durable and portable goods was related to the increase in crime in the 1960s and 1970s.

Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association

Perhaps the most influential general theory of criminality was that proposed by Edwin Sutherland (1883–1950) in his [differential association theory](#). Simply stated, the theory indicates that individuals become predisposed toward criminality because of an excess of contacts that advocate criminal behavior. Due to these contacts, a person will tend to learn and accept values and attitudes that look more favorably on criminality.

Differential association theory Sutherland's theory

that crime is learned due to exposure to an excess of contacts that advocate criminal behavior.

Sutherland's theory was strongly influenced by Charles Horton Cooley's (1902/1964) theory of personality, the ["looking-glass self."](#) Cooley viewed the human personality as a social self, one that is learned in the process of socialization and interaction with others. The personality as a social product is the sum total of an individual's internalization of the impressions he or she receives of the evaluation of others—or "mirror of alters." Significant others, people who are most important to the individual, are particularly important in this socialization process. Sutherland was also influenced by Shaw and McKay's (1942) notion of social disorganization and cultural transmission of crime, as well as by French sociologist Gabriel Tarde's (1890/1912) concept of imitation as the transmitter of criminal values. Similarly, in Sutherland's explanation of criminality, crime is a learned social phenomenon, transmitted in the same manner in which more conventional behavior and attitudes are passed on.

Looking-glass self

Cooley's theory of personality as a perceived perception of the reaction of others.

In explaining how he developed the theory, Sutherland indicated that he was not even aware that he had done so until, in 1935, Henry McKay referred to "Sutherland's theory": "I asked him what my theory was. He referred me to pages 51–52 of my book" (Sutherland, 1956b, p. 14). The first edition of Sutherland's text, *Principles of Criminology*, was published in 1924; although the 1934 edition to which McKay referred contained the nexus of a theory, it was in the 1939 edition that Sutherland outlined its major propositions. These were slightly modified in the 1947 edition and have remained essentially the same in subsequent editions, which have been coauthored or (since Sutherland's death in 1950) authored by Donald Cressey.

The nine propositions of the differential association theory are these:

1. Criminal behavior is learned.
2. Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.

3. The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.
4. When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very simple, and (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
5. The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.
6. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law.
7. Differential association may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.
8. The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anticriminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.
9. Although criminal behavior is an explanation of general needs and values, it is not explained by them because noncriminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values (Sutherland, 1947, pp. 6–7).

Differential association theory is not directed at the issue of the origin of crime in society but concentrates instead on the transmission of criminal attitudes and behavior. It is a behavioristic theory—previous behavior causes subsequent behavior—and contains elements of a soft social determinism; that is, exposure to groups does not cause but predisposes individuals to criminal activity or causes them to view it more favorably. Why, then, do not all people with similar exposure become similarly criminal? Sutherland's notion of variations in contacts provides for individual reaction to social groups and exposures.

Contacts in Differential Association

Contacts in differential association vary according to frequency, duration, priority, and intensity. *Frequency* deals with the number of contacts and *duration* with the length of time over which an individual is exposed to such contacts. The sheer length and volume of association with criminogenic influences affect different people in different ways. Humans are not robots responding in a predictable manner to a given number of influences. *Priority* refers to the preference individuals express toward the values and attitudes to which they are exposed, and *intensity* entails the degree of meaning the human actor attaches to such exposure. Although Sutherland (1947) admits an inability to reach a quantitative or exact measurement of these modalities, a general example should illustrate their operation: What explains the good child in the bad environment? Despite a great frequency and long duration of exposure to criminal attitudes, such individuals fail to prefer such values and attach greater meaning to noncriminal attitudes that, although less frequently available, may be found in significant others, perhaps role models such as teachers, coaches, peers, and the like.



Criminology in Context 7.1

Designing Out Crime

Our failure to bring crime under control through a wide range of modifications to the criminal justice system has blinded us to the successful efforts continuously being made by a host of private and public entities—municipalities, schools, hospitals, parks, malls, bus companies, banks, department stores, taverns, offices, factories, parking lots—to bring a wide range of troublesome and costly crimes under control. In most cases, these successes are achieved by identifying ways to reduce opportunities for highly specific kinds of crime, the approach advocated by environmental crime prevention.

The essential tenets of environmental crime prevention, of which Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) and Situational Crime Prevention are the best-known examples, are to

- increase the difficulty of committing crime (e.g., credit card photos),
- increase the perceived risks (e.g., burglar alarms),
- reduce the rewards associated with criminal acts (e.g., PIN for car radios), and
- reduce the rationalizations that facilitate crime (e.g., simplify tax forms).

Although the federal government gave some support to CPTED in the 1970s, interest in environmental crime prevention has languished in our country. One reason for this loss

of support was the concern that blocking opportunities for crime would result in its displacement to some other target, time, or place (i.e., the net amount of crime would remain the same, although its manifestations would be different). This belief was bolstered by criminological theories that generally failed to recognize important situational determinants of crime, such as the availability of tempting goods to steal and the absence of adequate guardianship of vulnerable property and persons.

In recent years, however, new criminological theories have emphasized the role of opportunities in crime causation. These theories, which include routine activity theory and rational choice theory, argue that as the number of opportunities for crime increases, more crimes will be committed; conversely, as opportunities are reduced, so crime will decline. Whether or not displacement takes place depends on the ease with which offenders can obtain the same criminal rewards without greatly increased effort or risks. Somebody who has developed the habit of shoplifting from the supermarket will not inevitably turn to some other form of crime, involving greater risk of detection and more severe penalties, if the store takes effective preventive action. In fact, particular crimes serve special purposes for the offender. A thwarted rapist will not turn to mugging or drug dealing.

Policy Recommendations

Federal Crime Prevention Department. A crime prevention department should be established in the Department of Justice along the lines of similar units now functioning in a number of European countries. This unit would have a research and dissemination role and would also initiate action to “design out crime” that more naturally falls to central government than to state or local agencies. For example, the department could ensure the security of the phone system, of credit cards, or of ATM cards through federal influence on manufacturers and service providers at an industry level. Important preventive initiatives that currently need federal government sponsorship include development of effective personal alarms for repeat victims of domestic violence.

Crime Prevention Extension Service. A Crime Prevention Extension Service, linked to local universities, along the lines of the successful agricultural model, should be developed within the Department of Justice. Its mandate should be to deliver expert crime prevention advice to small businesses and local communities. Such a service would complement rather than compete with the work of the police, especially as community policing ideas take hold.

For Further Thought

1. Search online for the name “Oscar Newman.” What is his main thesis regarding the impact of defensible space on crime?

Source: American Society of Criminology Task Force Report to Attorney General Janet Reno, *The Criminologist* (Special Issue), 20, 6, November/December 1995. Task force members on “Designing Out Crime” included Ronald V. Clarke (chair), Patricia Brantingham, Paul Brantingham, John Eck, and Marcus Felson.

A Critique of Differential Association

Because it is a general theory of criminality and is relatively compatible with many other explanations of crime, differential association theory enjoyed widespread acceptance in the field. It was not, however, without critics. Donald Cressey, Sutherland's coauthor, explains that because Sutherland's principal propositions are presented in only two pages in his textbook, the theory is often misinterpreted by some critics, most notably Vold (1958). Among these claimed errors of interpretation, Cressey (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974, pp. 78–80) mentions the following:

- The theory is concerned only with contacts or associations with criminal or delinquent behavior patterns. (It actually refers to both criminal and noncriminal behavior, as demonstrated by the use of terms such as *differential* and *excess* of contacts.)
- The theory says persons become criminals because of an excess of associations with criminals. (It actually says that criminal attitudes can be learned from the unintentional

transmission of such values by noncriminals.)

- Using the 1939 version of the theory, critics believe the theory refers to “systematic criminals.” (This has been modified since the 1947 version to refer to all criminal behavior.)
- The theory fails to explain why persons have the associations they have. (It does not pretend to do so.)

Cressey (1960) also addresses other criticisms that he feels are misinterpretations; however, a number of shortcomings have been identified:

- Whereas Sutherland traces the roots of criminality to culture conflict and social disorganization, a comprehensive theory of criminality should provide more explanation of the origin of crime.
- Because it is a general theory, it is difficult to either empirically prove or disprove it by means of research, and reformulations are necessary to permit testing (see Burgess & Akers, 1966; DeFleur & Quinney, 1966).
- The theory fails to account for all forms of criminality.
- The theory fails to acknowledge the importance of non-face-to-face contacts such as media influences (Radzinowicz & King, 1977).

Despite these and other criticisms, differential association remains important as a useful general theory of criminality, even though it may fail to specify the process for each individual case of criminality. The theory of differential association is one of the most cited theories in modern criminology and will probably remain so until a more acceptable general theory of criminality appears.

A variation of differential association can be found in Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers’s (1966) differential reinforcement (social learning) theory.

“Differential reinforcement” refers to the balance of anticipated or actual rewards or punishments that follow or are consequences of behavior. Whether individuals will refrain from or commit a crime at any given time . . . depends on the past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishments for their action. (Akers, 1994, p. 98)

Burgess and Akers’s (1966) theory combines Sutherland’s concept with behavioral conditioning and even classical concepts of rewards and punishments and has found considerable empirical support.

Miller’s Focal Concerns Theory

Walter Miller’s (1958) ideas appeared in an article titled “Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency.” Miller limited the applicability of his theory to “members of adolescent street corner groups in lower class communities” (p. 5). Unlike Albert Cohen, who viewed such delinquency as a lower-class reaction to middle-class values, Miller views such activity as a reflection of the **focal concerns** of dominant themes in lower-class culture. These are “areas or issues that command widespread and persistent attention and a high degree of emotional involvement” (p. 7). Faced with a chasm between aspirations and the likelihood of their achievement, lower-class youth seek status and prestige within one-sex peer units (gangs) in which they exaggerate focal concerns already in existence in lower-class culture. Thus, gang delinquency, rather than representing an anomic reaction to unobtainable middle-class goals, represents, in the tradition of social process theory, a pattern of subcultural transmission or learning of values prevalent in the local environment.

Focal concerns

Miller’s theory of crime that reflects an overemphasis on lower-class values.

The focal concerns of lower-class culture emphasize trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy. Getting into *trouble* often confers prestige and a means of obtaining attention. The “class clown” and the “bad dude” become attention-getting roles.

Toughness, "machismo," having physical prowess, and being able to handle oneself are highly prized characteristics among lower-class males. The "hard guy" is preferable to the "chump," "wimp," or "sissy." *Smartness* "involves the capacity to outsmart, outfox, outwit, dupe, 'take,' or 'con' another" (W. Miller, 1958, p. 7). This is illustrated by the "streetwise" game of "playin' the dozens" (Berdie, 1947), a highly ritualistic game of razzing, "ranking," or "cappin' on someone's mom" practiced by lower-class black males in particular. Extremely foul insults are traded by two antagonists, the themes usually relating to sexual matters and female relatives of one's opponent. Such insults are rhythmically presented one-liners whose object is to leave the opponent speechless or "humbled out." Playin' the dozens is also known as *signification*. A young man engaging in such activities, creating poetry of the streets, would be regarded in conventional society as having a "bad mouth."

The theme of *excitement* emphasizes the quest for skill, danger, risk, change, or activity. Rather than a subject of control and planning, the future is perceived as a matter of *fate*, luck, or good fortune. Gambling's popularity in lower-class culture makes it the "poor person's stock exchange." *Autonomy* (independence) looms as a dominant concern in lower-class culture, particularly among males, even though it is less likely to be achieved given their narrow occupational and life options. "Being one's own man," that is, being free from authority, "the man," and external constraint, is a strong value.

A Critique of Miller's Theory

- Like the other subcultural theories, Miller's theory also ignores middle- and upper-class delinquent and criminal activity.
- By focusing exclusively on the lower class, Miller and others in this tradition are perhaps most responsible for the criticism that mainstream sociology ignores deviance of the powerful.
- Miller's theory rests heavily on the assumption of the existence of a distinctive lower-class culture that holds values and attitudes distinct from, if not at odds with, dominant middle-class values. The pluralistic nature of U.S. society makes it quite uncertain that such a distinctive value system, solely based on class, indeed exists.

Miller's theory views criminogenic influences as learned or transmitted as part of subcultural values. Similarly, the writings of David Matza present delinquency as part of a general social process of learned cultural values rather than as an anomic reaction to unobtainable goals.

Matza's Delinquency and Drift Theory

The theories of David Matza are presented in his book *Delinquency and Drift* (1964) and in a coauthored article with Gresham Sykes (Sykes & Matza, 1957), titled "Techniques of Neutralization." Matza's theories, including that of **delinquency and drift**, are an example of **soft determinism**, which holds that, although human behavior is determined to some extent by outside forces, there still exists an element of free will or individual responsibility (Matza, 1964). Humans are neither entirely constrained nor entirely free, nor is the individual entirely committed to delinquent or nondelinquent behavior. Matza explains the drift theory of delinquency:

Delinquency and drift

Matza's theory that delinquents exist in a limbo wherein they drift back and forth between delinquency and conventionality.

Soft determinism

theories that indicate that certain forces have an influence but do not determine behavior.

The delinquent exists in a limbo between convention and crime responding in turn to the demands of each, flirting now with one, now the other, but postponing commitment, evading decision. Thus he drifts between criminal and conventional action. (p. 28)

Subterranean Values

Rather than being wholly committed to delinquency, most delinquents are dabbling in it and are acting out **subterranean values** (Matza, 1964) that exist alongside more conventional values in a pluralistic society such as the United States. Conventional society attempts to control the expression of these values and reserve it for the proper time and place; in a sense, it is the practice of "morality with a wink." The delinquent, rather than being committed to goals that are alien to society, exaggerates society's subterranean values and acts them out in caricature. Sykes and Matza (1957) explain,

Subterranean values

underground values that exist alongside conventional values.

The delinquent may not stand as an alien in the body of society but may represent instead a disturbing reflection or caricature. His vocabulary is different, to be sure, but kicks, big time spending and rep have immediate counterparts in the value system of the law abiding. The delinquent has picked up and emphasized one part of the subterranean values that coexist with other, publicly proclaimed values possessing a more respectable air. (p. 717)



Photo 7.4 The site where teenager Junior Guzman-Felix was brutally attacked and stabbed to death by a local street gang on July 7, 2018, in the Bronx, New York, attracts mourners.

Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis News/Getty Images

Thus, whereas conventional mores disapprove of subterranean values, they often represent "hidden" patterns or themes in the culture. Illicit sexual behavior, slick business practices, a dislike of work, substance abuse, and media violence as a popular form of entertainment are examples. Delinquents simply have poor training and timing in the expression of subterranean values. The pervasiveness of subterranean values might be illustrated by the attempt of conventional members of "straight" society to appear "hip," "with it," and "streetwise."

Techniques of Neutralization

Sykes and Matza's (1957) term **techniques of neutralization** refers to rationalizations or excuses that juveniles use to neutralize responsibility for deviant actions. In drift situations, offenders can lessen their responsibility by exaggerating normal legal defenses (e.g., self-defense or insanity) or by pointing to the subterranean values prevalent in society. Sykes and Matza identify five techniques of neutralization:

1. Denial of responsibility, such as appeals based on one's home life, lack of affection, and social class
2. Denial of harm to anyone, such as defining stealing as "borrowing" or drug abuse as harming no one but the offender
3. Denial of harm to the victim, in which the assault is justified because the person harmed was also a criminal
4. Condemning the condemners, reversing the labeling process by claiming that authorities are more corrupt than the offender and are hypocritical as well
5. Appeal to higher authority, which claims that the offense was necessary to defend one's neighborhood or gang

Techniques of neutralization

rationalizations (excuses) used by juveniles to explain away responsibility for their actions.

As an illustration of the techniques of neutralization, the song "Gee, Officer Krupke" from the musical *West Side Story* has members of the gang the Jets arguing that they are victims of "a social disease."

Sykes and Matza (1957) explain,

The delinquent both has his cake and eats it too, for he remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are "acceptable" if not "right." Thus the delinquent represents not a radical opposition to law abiding society but something more like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes. We call these justifications of deviant behavior techniques of neutralization; and we believe these techniques make up a crucial component of Sutherland's "definitions favorable to the violation of the law." It is by learning these techniques that the juveniles become delinquent, rather than by learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in direct contradiction to those of the dominant society. (p. 668)

A Critique of Matza's Theory

Matza provides a transition between Sutherland's social process theories and the social control theories to be discussed next. By combining deterministic models with the notion of free will, he avoids the overly deterministic nature of many earlier theories and explains why the majority of individuals who find themselves in criminogenic settings do not commit crime. His concept of neutralization enables him to escape the problem inherent in previous subcultural theories of delinquency, which rested on the premise that delinquent values were at variance with conventional values. Some possible shortcomings of Matza's views include the following:

- Although some research has shown offenders to be prone to rationalizing their behavior (R. Ball, 1980; Regoli & Poole, 1978), Hindelang (1970) found different value systems among delinquents. Obviously, more research is needed.
- In order for his theory to be correct, empirical evidence must demonstrate that Matza's neutralization takes place during the period of drift preceding the act, a concept that may be difficult to operationalize.

Hamlin (1988) argues that the notion of rational choice in neutralization theory has been misplaced and that such rationalizations are used after the fact only when behavior is called into question (see Minor, 1981, 1984, for additional analysis).

The transitional nature of Matza's theories with social control approaches can be found in his notion of drift, in which individuals become temporarily detached from social control mechanisms. This release from group bonds is the basic unit of analysis in social control theories.

LEARNING CHECK 7.4

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 476.

1. Choose the best answer: Which of the following is not one of the focal concerns identified by Miller?
 - a. Getting into trouble
 - b. Toughness
 - c. Smartness
 - d. Generosity
2. **True or False?** Sutherland's differential association theory proposes that individuals learn criminal behavior through interaction with others.
3. **Fill in the Blank:** If I steal a set of headphones from Best Buy and tell my friend afterward that the company is so large that the theft would not harm anyone, I am using a _____.



Applying Theory 7.2

Recall the terrible story of Aileen Wuornos from [Chapter 5](#), page 134. Using this case study, apply either differential association or focal concerns theory to explain why she killed seven men.

Remember to consider the following:

1. What types of crimes does differential association or focal concerns theory explain?
2. To whom does the theory apply?
3. According to the theory, what are the main causes of crime? That is, what are the theory's propositions?
4. Once you have identified these propositions, explain how they apply (or not) to the case of Aileen Wuornos.

SOCIAL CONTROL THEORIES

The final grouping of mainstream sociocriminological theories to be discussed is referred to as *social control theories* and is represented by the work of Walter Reckless and Travis Hirschi.

[Social control theories](#) address the issue of how society maintains or elicits social control and the manner in which it obtains conformity or fails to obtain it in the form of deviance. Although a number of writers have contributed to social control theories, this presentation concentrates primarily on the formulations of Walter Reckless and his associates (Reckless, 1961; Reckless & Dinitz, 1967; Reckless, Dinitz, & Murray, 1956) and Travis Hirschi (1969).

Social control theories

view crime as taking place when social control or bonds to society break down.

Reckless's Containment Theory

One of the earliest and best-known examples of social control theory was Walter Reckless's (1961) containment theory. Like his contemporary Sutherland, Reckless was a product of the Chicago school of sociology and one of the mainstream pioneers in U.S. criminology (Gibbons, 1979). Reckless wrote an early textbook called *The Crime Problem* in 1940 and, in a much later edition, began to state his theories. [Containment theory](#) basically holds that individuals have various social controls (containments) that assist them in resisting pressures that draw them toward criminality. This theory attempts to account for social forces that may predispose individuals to crime as well as for individual characteristics that may insulate them from or further propel them toward criminality. Various social pressures, treated in previously discussed deterministic theories, exert pushes and pulls on the individual; these pressures interact with containments (protective barriers), both internal and external to the individual, and these containments add the element of free will in resisting criminality. Thus, the presence or absence of social pressures interacts with the presence or absence of containments to produce or not produce individual criminality.

Containment theory

Reckless's theory that crime takes place when pressures are high and containments (protections) are low.

The basic elements of Reckless's containment theory (Reckless & Dinitz, 1967; Reckless, Dinitz, & Kay, 1957) can be summarized as follows.

Layers of Social Pressures

- External pressures push an individual toward criminality. Variables impinging on an individual include poor living conditions, adverse economic conditions, minority group

membership, and the lack of legitimate opportunities.

- External pulls draw individuals away from social norms and are exerted from without by bad companions, deviant subcultures, and media influences.
- Internal pressures push an individual toward criminality; they include personality contingencies such as inner tensions, feelings of inferiority or inadequacy, mental conflict, organic defects, and the like.

Containments

- Inner containments refer to the internalization of conventional behavioral values and the development of personality characteristics that enable one to resist pressures. Strong self-concept, identity, and strong resistance to frustration serve as examples.
- Outer containments are represented by effective family and near support systems that assist in reinforcing conventionality and insulating the individual from the assault of outside pressures.

Reckless and his colleagues felt that the theory was helpful in explaining both delinquency and nondelinquency, as indicated by the title of one article, "The 'Good Boy' in a High Delinquency Area" (Reckless, Dinitz, & Murray, 1957). Individuals may become predisposed toward criminality because of strong external pressures and pulls and weak inner and outer containments, whereas others with these same pressures may resist because of a strong family or through a strong sense of self. Weak containments plus strong external pressures provide the conditions for individual criminality. The attractiveness of containment theory is its general ability to subsume variables discussed in other more specific theories as well as its attempt to link the deterministic and free will models and to intersect socioeconomic factors, as well as biological and psychological factors, with individual biography.

A Critique of Containment Theory

Reckless and associates (Reckless, Dinitz, & Kay, 1957; Reckless, Dinitz, & Murray, 1957; Scarpitti, Murray, Dinitz, & Reckless, 1960) have attempted to verify his theory. In one study, they had teachers in a high-delinquency area nominate "good boys"; they found strong self-images as well as more conventional behavior among this group 4 years later. But critics called for more research, indicating that poor operationalization and weak methodology had plagued these studies (Schrag, 1971; Schwartz & Tangri, 1965). As a very general sensitizing theory that attempts to account for both criminogenic forces and individual responses, the containment theory is a useful descriptive model, but actual empirical specification of the process is problematic.

Hirschi's Social Bond Theory

Travis Hirschi (1969) in *Causes of Delinquency* presented his **social bond theory**, which basically states that delinquency takes place when a person's bonds to society are weakened or broken, thus reducing personal stakes in conformity. Individuals maintain conformity for fear that violations will rupture their relationships (cause them to "lose face") with family, friends, neighbors, jobs, school, and the like. In essence, individuals conform not for fear of prescribed punishments in the criminal law but rather from concern with violating their group's mores and the personal image of them held by those groups. These bonds to society consist of four components: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

Social bond theory

people become criminal when their stakes in society are broken.

Attachment refers to a bond to others (such as family and peers) and important institutions (such as churches and schools). Weak attachment to parents and family may impair personality development, and poor relationships with the school are viewed as particularly instrumental in delinquency. *Commitment* involves the degree to which an individual maintains a vested interest in the social and economic system. If an individual has much to lose in terms of status, job, and community standing, he or she is less likely to violate the law. Adults, for instance, have many more such commitments than do juveniles. *Involvement* entails engagement in legitimate social and recreational activities that either leaves too little time to

get into trouble or binds one's status to yet other important groups whose esteem one wishes to maintain. Finally, *belief* in the conventional norms and value system and the law acts as a bond to society. Like Reckless's containment theory and Matza's delinquency and drift, Hirschi's social bond theory combines elements of determinism and free will; individual choice still enters the equation.



Photo 7.5 Still from the movie *Moonlight* (2016) illustrates the lack of family support and personal bonds for a young, African American, gay man growing up in a rough neighborhood of Miami.

Moviestore collection Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

A Critique of Social Bond Theory

Social bond theory has been relatively well received because as a general theory, it subsumes and is supported by many more specific findings with respect to relationships between crime or delinquency and particular variables. School performance, family relationships, peer group attachments, and community involvement as predictors of norm violation have been stock items in criminological research. Research by Hirschi (1969), a partial replication by Hindelang (1973), and a review of studies by Bernard (1987) provide some strong support for control theory. Strong parental attachments, commitment to conventional values, and involvement in conventional activities and with conventional peers were found to be predictive of nondelinquent activity. Whereas Agnew (1985) found that social control variables explained only 1% to 2% of future delinquency and that cross-sectional studies exaggerated the importance of Hirschi's theory, Rosenbaum (1987) found that the theory explained some types of delinquency better than others. The theory accounted for more female than male crime and for more drug use than violence or property offenses. Variations of social control theory have been offered by Briar and Piliavin (1965), who theorize that individuals evaluate the risk of being caught and punished once bonds are weakened, and Glaser (1978), who combines elements of differential association, control, and classical theory. Although Hirschi's social control appears to be quite useful in explaining the general process of commitment or noncommitment to delinquency, more research is certainly needed to specify and modify it. Hirschi's theory is not concerned with societal origins of crime but with individual deviation from given societal norms.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime

As a successor to his social bond theory, Hirschi joined with Michael Gottfredson in proposing another theory. Combining elements of classical, positivistic, and social control theories, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1990) claim to have developed a general theory of crime. This general theory is that low self-control in the pursuit of self-interest causes crime. Deficiencies in parenting distinguish those who express this trait, who express themselves in greater deviance and criminality, from those who do not. Those with high self-control would be less likely to become involved in such activity. Surprisingly, Hirschi and Gottfredson also claim that this same self-control theory explains white-collar crime (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1987) and that the causes of white-collar crime are not distinct from the causes of other crimes (see Cullen et al., 1991; Daly, 1989).

Glaser (1990) notes that Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime is "usefully complemented, and not contradicted, by differential association, deviant subculture, and social learning theories. These theories explain why socially disorganized neighborhoods provide the greatest opportunities, social support, and learned rationalizations for persons to express low self-control in street felonies" (p. 2).

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime is a very ambitious effort, it is regarded as severely flawed in relation to what later in the [next chapter](#) is described as the global fallacy, the tendency to make a useful specific theory of crime explain all crime. Is this theory intended to explain corporate price fixing, insider trading on Wall Street, or international

terrorism? Hirschi and Gottfredson also rely on the Uniform Crime Reports for their measurement of white-collar crime. This is a “baffling” (Reed & Yeager, 1991) error because, as any student of criminology is aware, the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) measures only the white-collar crimes of fraud, forgery, and embezzlement, and even these tend to be less serious cases (Steffensmeier, 1989b). The UCR is a worthless measure of white-collar crime. Reed and Yeager (1996) further point out that Hirschi and Gottfredson test their theory by focusing on white-collar crimes that most resemble conventional crimes. When Reed and Yeager examined the theory using organizational (corporate) offenders, they found it inadequate.

Finally, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#) in the section on the family, there is a tendency in this theory to commit what Currie (1985) calls the “fallacy of autonomy” (p. 185), to assume that what happens in the family (poor parenting creating low self-control) is somehow separate from other social policies, inequality, racism, unemployment, and social neglect.

John Hagan’s Power-Control Theory

John Hagan (1989), in his [power-control theory](#) of crime, attempts to rectify a major shortcoming in delinquency theory: its almost total ignoring of female offenders. Viewing much delinquency as risk taking or fun, children who are exposed to strong parental controls will avoid risk, which lessens delinquency. According to John Hagan, power relationships between father and mother influence the control exercised over sons and daughters.

Power-control theory

in egalitarian households, both boys and girls have more similar delinquency levels.

In traditional patriarchal households, boys are exposed to fewer controls than girls and are, therefore, greater risk takers and more delinquent than girls. In more egalitarian family structures, both sexes are subject to similar social controls and have more similar delinquency levels. Cullen and Agnew (2003) indicate that the empirical validity of John Hagan’s thesis is still in doubt. The theory does not appear to address single-parent families or more serious, violent crime.

LEARNING CHECK 7.5

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 476.

1. **Fill in the Blank:** If I do not engage in delinquency because of the strong bonds I have with my parents, I have the social bond of _____.
2. **True or False?** According to control theories, people do not commit crime because of controls that are either external or internal that work to instill conformity.
3. **Fill in the Blank:** According to the general theory of crime, _____ is the cause of crime.



Applying Theory 7.3

Recall the terrible story of Aileen Wuornos from [Chapter 5](#), page 134. Using this case study, apply one of the control theories to explain why she killed seven men.

Remember to consider the following:

1. What types of crimes do control theories explain?
2. To whom does the theory apply?
3. According to the theory, what are the main causes of crime? That is, what are the theory’s propositions?
4. Once you have identified these propositions, explain how they apply (or not) to the case of Aileen Wuornos.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND LIFE COURSE (DLC) THEORIES

Developmental and life course (DLC) theories address three ideas:

1. The development of offending and antisocial behavior
2. Risk factors of delinquency or committing crime at different ages
3. Effects of life events on life course development (Farrington, 2003)

Developmental and life course (DLC) theories

espouse the belief that criminal activity changes over an individual's lifetime from onset to persistence to desistance.

David Farrington (2003), one of the leading advocates of these theories, carefully delimits their purpose when he indicates that the theories are intended to explain "crimes of theft, burglary, robbery, violence, vandalism, minor fraud and drug use" as exhibited in official records and self-reports (p. 225). Thus, DLC theories are intended to apply to offending by lower-class, urban males in Western society (Farrington, 2003). *Developmental theories* in criminology began in the 1980s with the work of Alfred Blumstein and associates (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986) and their longitudinal studies of criminal careers. Large-scale longitudinal studies during the 1990s supplied the raw material for developmental theories. These included studies in Denver, Pittsburgh, Rochester, New Zealand, and Montreal (Huizinga, Wylie Weiher, Espiritu, & Esbensen, 2003).

Farrington (2003, pp. 223–224) identifies 10 assumptions about offending that DLC theories must explain:

1. Offending prevalence peaks between 15 and 19 years of age.
2. Onset offending peaks between ages 8 and 14, and desistance occurs between ages 20 and 29.
3. Early onset portends long criminal duration and the commission of many offenses.
4. There is continuity in offending from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. High offenders in one period tend to be high offenders in the next, even though most eventually desist from crime.
5. Chronic offenders have an early onset, high offense frequency, and long criminal careers.
6. Offenders are versatile rather than specialized, with violent offenders indistinguishable from other frequent offenders.
7. Offenders are versatile at crimes as well as antisocial behavior such as bullying, truancy, and heavy drinking.
8. Crimes in the teenage years tend to take place in groups, whereas offenses after age 20 are committed alone.
9. Prior to age 20, revenge, excitement, or anger may motivate offenders; after this age, utilitarian motives predominate.
10. The onset of different types of offenses occurs at different ages. Shoplifting takes place sooner than burglary, which occurs before robbery. Diversification in crime increases to age 20, after which specialization increases (Piquero, Oster, Mazerolle, Brame, & Dean, 1999). Gang membership has its onset in the teens and desistance in the early 20s.

Desistance (quitting criminal activity) after age 20 is predicted by life events such as marriage, employment, military service, and better residential environments. The task of DLC theories is to specify risk factors and protective factors for persistence or desistance after age 20. Farrington (2003) denotes a variety of DLC theories that are too detailed to cover other than in a cursory manner in this text. This includes Farrington's integrated cognitive antisocial potential (ICAP) theory, which features his key variable of antisocial potential (AP).

Desistance

in life course criminality theory, the quitting or cessation of criminal activity.

Farrington's Antisocial Potential (AP) Theory

As one example of a developmental theory, Farrington's ICAP **antisocial potential (AP)** theory posits that relatively few people have high AP or potential to commit antisocial acts. Long-term AP involves impulsiveness, strain, and life events, whereas short-term AP depends on situational and motivating factors. Desires for material goods, peer status, excitement, and sexual experience combined with antisocial means of satisfying these needs that are denied legitimately result in high AP. Attachments, the socialization process, and other factors associated with the individual and his or her social environment affect AP.

Farrington's notion that bad life events increase one's antisocial disposition.

Other DLC theories include Catalano and Hawkins's (1996) social development model (SDM), which explores the balance between antisocial and prosocial bonding. The prosocial pathway rewards prosocial behavior, whereas the antisocial pathway leads to antisocial bonding. Offending in teenage years is affected primarily by bonding to antisocial peers, and life events such as marriage and moving out of the city lead to desistance. Terrie Moffitt (1999) distinguishes between life course persisters (LCP) and adolescence-limited offenders (AL). LCP is predicted by neuropsychological problems such as hyperactivity, impulsivity, low self-control, and childhood temperament (Farrington, 2003). LCPs fail to learn prosocial behavior, whereas AL offending is only temporary.

Marc LeBlanc (1996) proposed an integrated control theory, which argues that bonding and personality affect modeling and constraints that influence offending. Social disorganization, rational choice, self-control, and opportunities all influence crime commission. Terence Thornberry and Marvin Krohn's (2001) interactional theory sees offending (onset, duration, and desistance) as affected by other life course trajectories such as attachment to parents and commitment to school and work. Social class, race, and neighborhood influence behavioral trajectories. Causal processes (poverty, ineffective parents) interact with negative temperament and neuropsychological defects. Rolf Loeber et al. (1993), on the basis of their Pittsburgh longitudinal study, suggest different pathways to crime and delinquency. These include an "authority conflict pathway," which features stubborn behavior that leads to disobedience and defiance, and a "covert pathway" characterized by lying, property destruction, and street crime. The "overt pathway" involves aggressive acts. Perhaps the best known of recent DLC theories is found in the writings of Robert Sampson and John Laub.

Sampson and Laub's Life Course Criminality

Robert Sampson and John Laub, in "Life-Course Desisters?" (2003), look at social bonds as they affect adult offending and examine continuities and change in criminality over time. What accounts for persistence or desistance in adult criminal behavior? Sampson and Laub find the answer in social interaction with adult institutions of social control, particularly jobs and marital relations that serve as inhibitors of crime. The life course is defined as pathways through the age differential life span, during which events take place that influence life stages, transitions, and turning points. Trajectories and transitions are key components in life course theory. The timing and ordering of significant life events affect criminality. A trajectory is a long-term pathway such as work life, marriage, parenthood, self-esteem, and criminal behavior. Transitions are specific events that take place in these trajectories such as a first job or first marriage. The same event followed by adaptations may lead to different trajectories (Sampson & Laub, 2003).

Sampson and Laub contend that childhood antisocial behavior is associated with a variety of later adult misconduct, such as offenses in the military, educational failure, employment instability, and marital discord. Furthermore, they posit that "social bonds to adult institutions of informal social control (e.g., family, education, neighborhood, work) influence criminal behavior over the life course despite an individual's delinquent and anti-social background" (Sampson & Laub, 2003, p. 562). The importance of social controls varies across the life course. In childhood and adolescence, family, school, and peer groups are important; in early adulthood, higher education, training, work, and marriage take precedence; and in later adulthood, work, marriage, parenthood, and community become important.

In developing their theory, Sampson and Laub did a secondary analysis (reanalysis) of longitudinal data gathered by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950), which had begun in the 1930s. The Gluecks had followed matched cohorts of 500 delinquent and 500 nondelinquent boys. Involving detailed follow-up with parents, teachers, and officials, the boys were interviewed at age 14, age 25, and age 32 and measured on a wide range of variables, including biological, sociological, and psychological. In examining the Glueck data, Sampson and Laub found that, when social bonds are weakened, delinquency increased. In addition, adult bonds such as marriage and jobs also explained criminality beyond earlier delinquency. Strong social relationships were also found to build social capital (what Hirschi called stakes in conformity) that inhibit deviance.

In 2003, Sampson and Laub published the longest longitudinal study in criminological history. The follow-up on the Gluecks' data tracked their cohort from age 7 to age 70. Examining whether they could identify a distinct offender group whose crime persisted with increasing age and the effect of individual, childhood, and family background on offending trajectories, they

came up short, finding that crime declined with age eventually for all offenders. Desistance worked for even the most active offenders and life course persists. Even childhood background predictors were ineffective in predicting long-term offending trajectories. All offenders were life course desisters in that all desisted but at different times in the life course.

DLC theory has been very popular and influential both in the field of criminology and in juvenile justice policy making. It has been endorsed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention as a component of its comprehensive plan for delinquency prevention. It has also been adopted by states such as Washington and Pennsylvania.



Applying Theory 7.4

Recall the terrible story of Aileen Wuornos from [Chapter 5](#), page 134. Using this case study, apply one of the life course theories to explain why Aileen persisted with a life of crime and ultimately killed seven men.

Remember to consider the following:

1. What types of crimes does life-course theory explain?
2. To whom does the theory apply?
3. According to the theory, what are the main causes of crime? That is, what are the theory's propositions?
4. Once you have identified these propositions, explain how they apply (or not) to the case of Aileen Wuornos.

THE THEORY-POLICY CONNECTION

Mainstream sociological theories are primarily concerned with how criminal values are transmitted. For Merton, crime originates in the American dream itself, a strain between generally accepted criteria for success and the lack of adequate means for many to achieve this success. This permeates American society and its institutions. Criminality is learned and culturally transmitted. It is due to social disorganization in pathological environments. Routine activities theory became popular as an explanation in the field of private security. By reducing and guarding targets better, crime is, we hope, reduced. [Table 7.2](#) outlines some of these theory-policy connections.

Table 7.2 The Theory-Policy Connection

Theory	Basic Assumptions About Crime Causation	Policies
Anomie	Anomie lessens social control and creates deviance	Policies to create greater opportunities and to improve neighborhoods
Social process	Social disorganization, routine activities, subculturally transmitted, subterranean values	Eradication of slums, War on Poverty
Social control	Containment theory, weakened social bonds, and poor self-control	Programs to strengthen the family, Head Start Job Corps, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act
Developmental/life course	Crime over the life course: onset, persistence, desistance	Expand opportunities, strengthen institutions

As socially disorganized slums were believed to cause crime, policy strategies to eradicate such blight and to improve community in such settings became predominant. LBJ's War on Poverty was heavily based on strain theory. Increasing opportunity was emphasized. Cloward and Ohlin, whose writings heavily influenced the Kennedy administration, developed a Mobilization for Youth Program that emphasized improving opportunities for disadvantaged youth. The programs were all optimistic and assumed that crime could be stamped out if only more opportunities could be created. Other programs of this era were Head Start, Job Corps, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, and affirmative action. Programs to strengthen the family derived from social control theories. The emphasis was on strengthening institutions rather than punishment and deterrence.

Mainstream sociological theories are highly optimistic and assume that social policies that address poverty, the lack of opportunities, better neighborhoods, education, families, unemployment, and other factors of social disorganization will reduce crime. Crime is viewed as a presenting problem for other deeper, underlying problems in society, and the belief is that addressing crime alone without examining the social system as a whole will be ineffective.

LEARNING CHECK 7.6

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 476.

1. **Fill in the Blank:** If you engaged in crime as an adolescent but then stop committing crime, you have gone through the process of _____.
2. **True or False?** Life course theories are different from other sociological theories in that they seek to explain crime that occurs when people are over the age of 65.
3. **Fill in the Blank:** According to Sampson and Laub's life course theory, entering into marriage and gainful employment are key _____ that may explain desistance from crime in early adulthood.
4. **True or False?** Criminals tend to be versatile in their offending.

Crime & the Media 7.1

Sociological Mainstream Theories

Despite theories and research testing theories providing guidance as to who is most likely to commit crime and where crime is likely to occur, the media do not always give coverage to those stories that actually represent these "typical" crimes and criminals. Instead, research by Sorenson and colleagues (1998) revealed that homicides occurring in neighborhoods with the highest income level were about two times as likely to be covered by the media than homicides occurring in the lowest income areas. Paulsen (2003) furthered this research by investigating not just coverage but also the length of coverage. This research found that neighborhood income levels were positively associated with word count and the number of articles homicides received. This focus on serious crime events that happen in neighborhoods that are likely socially organized may influence how people perceive crime risk and where resources should be concentrated. What do you think this coverage means for people's understanding of how neighborhoods influence crime?

SUMMARY

Theory is necessary for capturing the essence of criminology. The major mainstream sociological theoretical approaches in criminology are mainstream theories (anomie, social process, and social control approaches).

Émile Durkheim is the father of the anomie tradition, which also includes Merton's notion of anomie and personality adaptations, Cloward and Ohlin's differential social organization, and Cohen's theory that delinquency is a lower-class reaction to middle-class values. Whereas Durkheim viewed anomie as a state of normlessness, a moral malaise experienced by individuals when they lack clear-cut guidelines, later theorists such as Merton adapted the theory to refer to a situation that results from a gap between societal goals and the means provided to achieve them. This, according to Merton, results in modes of personality adaptation: conformity, innovation, retreatism, ritualism, or rebellion. Cloward and Ohlin argued that the juvenile subculture gang response to anomie depends on the differential social organization (legal and illegal opportunity structures) in the neighborhood. Depending on the type, one of three juvenile delinquent subcultures may emerge: the criminal, conflict, or retreatist. Cohen's theory of delinquency presents it as lower-class reactions to unobtainable or rejected middle-class values such as ambition, verbal skills, nonviolence, and the like. He views much delinquency as nonutilitarian, malicious, and negativistic.

The *social process tradition* concentrates on learning, socialization, and subcultural transmission of criminal values. Originating in the work of the Chicago school of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly with the works of Burgess (concentric zone model), Park (natural areas), and Wirth (urbanism as a way of life), human ecology was seen, at least initially, as an organizing perspective. This approach examines the interrelationship between humans

and their physical and social environment. Included among better-known Chicago school criminologists are Clifford Shaw, David McKay, and Edwin Sutherland.


Making extensive use of maps and official statistics, Shaw and McKay viewed delinquency as reflecting the social disorganization of areas in which individuals lived, so delinquency was less a matter of individual abnormality and more a matter of cultural transmission or social learning. Concern that Shaw and McKay committed the ecological fallacy (attributed group characteristics to individuals) may be alleviated by the fact that they performed a number of case studies of criminals. Cohen and Felson's routine activities approach views crime as related to everyday, normal activities such as the proliferation of consumer goods and the lack of guardians. Sutherland's differential association theory, probably still the most popular theory in U.S. criminology, states that individuals become predisposed toward criminality because of an excess of contacts that advocate criminal behavior, contacts that vary according to frequency, priority, intensity, and duration. Differential association aims at describing the process by which crime is transmitted but does not address itself to origins of crime. Miller's theory of delinquency views it as reflecting the focal concerns of the lower class, such as an emphasis on trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy.

David Matza's delinquency and drift theory claims that individuals are often in limbo or an uncommitted status between delinquent and nondelinquent behavior. He and Gresham Sykes view delinquents as acting out subterranean values (underground values that exist along with more conventionally approved values) and using techniques of neutralization (rationalizations) to justify their behavior.

Social control theories argue that individuals deviate when removed or weakened. Reckless's containment theory views containments (Walter Reckless) or social bonds (Travis Hirschi) as individuals resisting or giving in to various pressures based on social controls (self-concept or close support systems). Hirschi's social bond theory states that delinquency arises when bonds to society are reduced and the individual has fewer stakes in conformity. These bonds consist of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

Developmental and life course criminality theories are an attempt to track the onset, persistence, and desistance of criminal behavior. They represent an effort to track crime commission longitudinally.

KEY CONCEPTS

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[Anomie](#) 177

[Antisocial potential \(AP\)](#) 198

[Chicago school](#) 184

[Containment theory](#) 194

[Delinquency and drift](#) 192

[Desistance](#) 198

[Developmental and life course \(DLC\) theories](#) 197

[Differential association theory](#) 187

[Differential opportunity theory](#) 182

[Ecological fallacy](#) 186

[Focal concerns](#) 191

[Human ecology](#) 184

[Looking-glass self](#) 187

[Lower-class reaction theory](#) 181

[Modes of personality adaptation](#) 178

[Natural areas](#) 184

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

 Test your understanding of chapter content. Take the practice quiz edge.sagepub.com/hagan10e

1. How does Merton's concept of anomie differ from that of Durkheim? What is your assessment of the usefulness of Merton's anomie or strain theory in explaining crime in the United States?
2. What contribution did the Chicago school of sociology make to the study of criminology?
3. What are Sutherland's differential association theory's assumptions regarding crime causation?
4. What is Miller's notion of delinquency, reflecting the focal concerns of the lower class? How does this differ from Albert Cohen's notion of delinquency being a lower-class reaction to middle-class society?
5. David Matza had three important concepts: delinquency and drift, subterranean values, and techniques of neutralization. Discuss each of these and explain how they explain delinquency and crime.
6. Discuss Reckless's containment theory. What are some containments that enable individuals to overcome the various layers of social pressures?
7. What is the major premise of social bond theory? How do these bonds vary for each individual? What have been some criticisms of this theory?
8. What is your assessment of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime?
9. How do mainstream sociological theories differ from the earlier classical, economic, ecological, and positivistic theories?
10. What is routine activities theory? Give an example of the practical application of this theory.

Web Sources


Crime Theories

<https://blog.udemy.com/criminology-theories>

WEB EXERCISES

Using this chapter's recommended web sources, answer the following questions.

1. Choose a mainstream criminological theory and search the web for information.
2. Perform an online search for "Robert K. Merton" and "Edwin H. Sutherland." Who had the most listings, and if you had a choice, on which theories do you think you could find the most useful information for a term paper?







 [Description](#)

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-  **Theory in Action Video 7.2** Shaw and McKay's Theory
-  **Theory in Action Video 7.3** Differential Association
-  **Theory in Action Video 7.4** Developmental Theory
-  **SAGE Journal Article 7.1** The general nature of online and off-line offending among college students



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Descriptions of Images and Figures

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A pictorial depiction of Burgess's concentric zone theory is shown here. The concentric numbered circles on the left show 5 zones labeled as follows.

1. Central business district
2. Zone of transition
3. Zone of independent workers' homes
4. Zone of better residences

5. Commuter's zone

The 3D depiction of the same appears on the right with tall buildings in the center in zone 1, smaller buildings in zone 2 around the tall buildings in zone 1. There are small buildings in zone 3 that form another circle around the buildings in zone 2. Zones 4 and 5 also have buildings arranged in concentric circles around zones 3 and 4 respectively.

[Back to image](#)

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Theory in Action Video 7.3 Differential Association

Theory in Action Video 7.4 Developmental Theory

SAGE Journal Article 7.1 The General Nature of Online and Off-Line Offending Among College Students

8 SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICAL THEORIES AND INTEGRATED THEORIES



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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 Compare and contrast critical and mainstream theory.
- 8.2 Discuss labeling theory and the concept of secondary deviance.
- 8.3 Summarize the basic elements of conflict criminology.
- 8.4 Compare feminist criminology with mainstream criminology.
- 8.5 Identify the emerging perspectives in new critical criminology.
- 8.6 Describe radical criminology's view on capitalism and crime.
- 8.7 Provide examples of how theories of crime can be integrated.

8.8 Describe the importance of crime typologies and the influence they have on criminology.

8.9 Evaluate the limitations of theoretical range and criminological explanations.

8.10 Identify the connections between sociological critical and integrated theories on crime policies.

The whole political process of law making, law breaking, and lawenforcement becomes a direct reflection of deep-seated and fundamental conflicts between interest groups and their more general struggles for the control of the police power of the state.

—George Vold (1958, pp. 208–209)

MAINSTREAM VERSUS CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY

The general characteristics of mainstream criminology, although subject to variation in individual anomie, social process, or social control theories, include the following (Gibbons, 1979; Gibbons & Garabedian, 1974):

- An emphasis on criminal behavior rather than on the criminalization of behavior. Emphasis had been on the criminal rather than on the social control machinery.
- A consensus worldview in which the existing society and its operations are perceived as relatively viable or unquestioned.
- A critical, sometimes cynical stance with respect to societal institutions, combined with a liberal optimism on reform measures.
- A mild pessimism regarding the perfectibility of the criminal justice system but willingness to work within the established social order.
- Advocating the rehabilitation of offenders and their adjustment to the status quo.
- A positivistic