# PART 2

# Crime and Victimization

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CHAPTER 2

# Counting and Explaining Crime

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## Chapter Outline

1. Counting Crime
2. Explaining Crime
3. Spotlight On: Crime and the Economy
4. Theory and Policy: Reducing Crime
5. International Focus: Myth and Reality of Crime in the British Countryside

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1. Why are accurate crime data essential? Why are accurate crime data difficult to obtain?
2. What is the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)?
3. What is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)?
4. What is the importance of self-report surveys in crime data collection?
5. Which information does field or ethnographic research on crime data provide?
6. Which factors does biological research on crime focus on?
7. How does psychological research contribute to our understanding of crime?
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9. What do various sources of crime data reveal about the characteristics of offenders?
10. How does the social environment influence an individual's chance of becoming an offender?

In April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Tech University, went on a rampage. Equipped with firearms and multiple rounds of ammunition, he soon killed 32 students and faculty before taking his own life. In the weeks after the massacre, people across the United States naturally wondered why he did it. News reports discussed his history of mental illness and speculated about his upbringing. Some observers wondered whether disparaging comments about his Korean nationality and personality might have driven his rage. Some firearms critics called for better gun control; other firearms advocates asserted that students and faculty should arm themselves. Some observers pointed to the fact that men commit almost all mass murders and discussed aspects of masculinity that account for this fact (Altamirano 2007; Herbert 2007; Kennedy 2007).

It might be fascinating to wonder why Cho committed the massacre, but we may never know the real answer. Still, the question "Why?" remains fundamental to the study of crime and criminal justice, as scholars today offer many explanations of why some people are more likely than others to become involved in criminal behavior of all types.

These explanations have advanced far beyond the more simplistic views put forth in earlier decades. Take, for example, the fact that men commit more crime than women, a gender difference examined later in this chapter. Scholars have tried to explain this difference for at least a century, and their early answers now sound positively antiquated (Van Wormer and Bartollas 2011). An

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important figure in the rise of scientific criminology, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso, said a century ago that women committed less crime because they were naturally passive. His "evidence" supporting this hypothesis was that sperm move around a lot more than does the egg in a woman's body. Sigmund Freud and his early followers thought that women were also naturally more passive but that, when they did commit crime, they acted out of penis envy: Because they were frustrated that they did not have a penis, women committed crime to be more like men. In 1950, one sociologist even wrote that women committed more crimes than people thought, but were especially good at hiding evidence of their crimes and, therefore, were more likely to evade arrest (Pollak 1950). His "evidence" for this supposed skill at being deceitful was that girls and women learn at an early age to hide evidence of their menstrual flow and, when they are having sexual intercourse, to pretend that they are enjoying themselves!

Contemporary explanations of crime reject such wrong-headed ideas, and we explore these explanations later in this chapter. First, however, we discuss how crime is counted. As we shall see, accurate measurement of crime is essential for sound explanations of it, yet it is difficult to know exactly how much crime exists and which kinds of people are most likely to engage in it.

## Counting Crime

Have you ever had anything stolen from you? Has anyone ever assaulted you? If either of these crimes ever happened to you, did you tell the police (or, if the incident occurred at college, campus security) about it? If someone you know was ever victimized by crime, did that person tell the police about it? If the police never heard about a crime you or someone you know might have suffered, that crime never became part of the United States' "official" crime count. Even when the police do hear about a crime, they do not always count it as an "official" crime, for reasons explained later in this chapter.

It is difficult to know exactly how many crimes occur. This is particularly true for a crime like prostitution, as neither the prostitute nor her customer is likely to report the crime to the police.

As these observations indicate, the measurement of crime is problematic. This difficulty exists even though the federal government, with the help of state and local agencies, devotes many resources to counting crime. Many criminal justice researchers gather information about crime on their own, often supported by federal funding. This huge effort reflects the importance of collecting crime data that are as accurate as possible.

Accurate crime data are essential for several reasons. First, they allow us to know whether crime is increasing, decreasing, or staying about the same. If our crime data are unreliable, we cannot be sure whether crime rates are rising or falling. And without this knowledge, we cannot know whether efforts to reduce crime are succeeding or whether economic and demographic changes in society are affecting the crime rate.

Second, accurate crime data enable us to determine where crime rates are higher or lower. Do urban areas have higher crime rates than rural areas? Do Southern states have higher homicide rates than Western states? Accurate determination of locations with different crime rates provides some clues about these locations' characteristics that contribute

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to their crime rates. Knowledge of these characteristics helps criminal justice practitioners and researchers understand some of the reasons for crime and, in turn, devise social and criminal justice policies for reducing crime.

Finally, accurate crime data allow us to know which people—in terms of age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, family background, and other factors—are more or less likely to commit crime and to be victims of crime. Such knowledge again helps practitioners and researchers to better explain crime and to devise the best approaches to reduce it.

Accurate crime data are essential for all these reasons, but how accurate are crime data in the first place? To answer this fundamental question, we must examine the major sources of information on crime, criminals, and victimization. In this section, we describe their various features, compare their strengths and weaknesses, and draw some conclusions about how accurately they portray the extent and distribution of crime and the characteristics of criminal offenders.

## The Uniform Crime Reports

The major source of official crime data in the United States is the **Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)** compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), an agency under the U.S. Department of Justice. Based on police reports, the UCR was begun in 1930 and collects several kinds of crime data, including the numbers and rates of various types of crimes, the numbers of people arrested for these crimes, the percentage of all crimes that are cleared by arrest, and the rates of crime by geographical region and by certain social characteristics such as age, race, and gender. Each year the FBI uses UCR data to produce its annual report, *Crime in the United States* (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2010), which comes out in the fall and summarizes crime statistics from the previous calendar year. Newspapers around the country usually devote at least one article to summarizing crime trends that appear in *Crime in the United States.* When you hear that crime is going up (or down), you are usually hearing about UCR data.

The UCR provides data on two categories of crime: Part I crimes and Part II crimes. Part I crimes consist of eight offenses that the FBI considers our most serious felonies. These are further broken down into two subcategories: *violent crime* and *property crime*. Violent crimes include murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crimes include burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and manslaughter. Part II crimes include such offenses as simple assault, forgery and counterfeiting, fraud, and gambling. A full list of Part I and Part II offenses and their definitions appears in **Table 2–1**.

### *Crime Rates*

The most important information provided in the UCR comprises crime rates and arrest rates. A UCR **crime rate** is like a percentage: It compares the number of crimes to the size of the population (see **Table 2–2**). The UCR's crime rates consist of the number of crimes for every 100,000 people in the population; the size of this population depends on the geographical unit being examined. For example, pretend you are living in a city (call it City A) of 300,000 people. Pretend further that a year ago 3,000 burglaries occurred in this city. To determine the crime rate, we divide 3,000 by 300,000 (3,000 ÷ 300,000) to get a result of 0.01. We then multiply this result by 100,000 to get a result of 1,000. This means that 3,000 burglaries in a city of 300,000 is equivalent to 1,000 burglaries for every 100,000 persons, and we say that City A has a burglary rate of 1,000 per 100,000 persons.

The use of crime rates is important for two reasons. First, it allows us to determine whether one location has a larger crime problem than another location. Consider our burglary example just discussed. City A had 300,000 residents and 3,000 burglaries, for a burglary rate of 1,000 per 100,000 persons. Now suppose a friend of yours is from City B, which has 500,000 residents and 4,000 burglaries. City B has more burglaries than City A, but does that mean that City B is less safe than City A when it comes to burglary? City B, after all, also has many more people than

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## Table 2–1 The Uniform Crime Reports

### Part I Offenses

**Criminal Homicide:** (a) murder and non-negligent manslaughter (the willful killing of one human being by another); deaths caused by negligence, attempts to kill, assaults to kill, suicides, accidental deaths, and justifiable homicides are excluded; (b) manslaughter by negligence (the killing of another person through gross negligence; traffic fatalities are excluded).
**Forcible Rape:** the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will; includes rapes by force and attempts to rape, but excludes statutory offenses (no force used and victim under age of consent).
**Robbery:** the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force and/or by putting the victim in fear.
**Aggravated Assault:** an unlawful attack by one person upon another to inflict severe bodily injury; usually involves use of a weapon or other means likely to produce death or great bodily harm. Simple assaults are excluded.
**Burglary:** unlawful entry, completed or attempted, of a structure to commit a felony or theft.
**Larceny-Theft:** unlawful taking, completed or attempted, of property from another's possession that does not involve force, threat of force, or fraud; examples include thefts of bicycles or car accessories, shoplifting, and pocket picking.
**Motor Vehicle Theft:** theft or attempted theft of a self-propelled motor vehicle that runs on the surface and not on rails; excluded are thefts of boats, construction equipment, airplanes, and farming equipment.
**Arson:** willful burning or attempt to burn a dwelling, public building, personal property, or other structure.

### Part II Offenses

**Simple Assaults:** assaults and attempted assaults involving no weapon and not resulting in serious injury.
**Forgery and Counterfeiting:** making, altering, uttering, or possessing, with intent to defraud, anything false in the semblance of that which is true.
**Fraud:** fraudulent obtaining of money or property by false pretense; included are confidence games and bad checks.
**Embezzlement:** misappropriation of money or property entrusted to one's care or control.
**Stolen Property:** buying, receiving, and possessing stolen property, including attempts.
**Vandalism:** willful destruction or defacement of public or private property without consent of the owner.
**Weapons:** carrying, possessing, and so on. All violations of regulations or statutes controlling the carrying, using, possessing, furnishing, and manufacturing of deadly weapons or silencers. Attempts are included.
**Prostitution and Commercialized Vice:** sex offenses such as prostitution and procuring.
**Sex Offenses:** statutory rape and offenses against common decency, morals, and so on. Excludes forcible rape and prostitution and commercial vice.
**Drug Abuse:** unlawful possession, sale, use, growing, and manufacturing of drugs.
**Gambling**
**Offenses Against the Family and Children:** nonsupport, neglect, desertion, or abuse of family and children.
**Driving Under the Influence**
**Liquor Laws:** state/local liquor law violations, except drunkenness and driving under the influence.
**Drunkenness**
**Disorderly Conduct:** breach of the peace.
**Vagrancy:** vagabonding, begging, loitering, and so on.
**All Other Offenses:** all violations of state/local laws, except as noted above, and traffic offenses.
**Suspicion:** no specific offense; suspect released without formal changes being placed.
**Curfew and Loitering Laws:** persons younger than age 18.
**Runaways:** persons younger than age 18.

**Source:** Adapted from "Crime in the United States, 2008: Offense Definitions," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009.

## Table 2–2 The Determination of a Crime Rate

$$\frac{\text{Number of Crimes}}{\text{Population}} \times 100{,}000 = \text{Crime Rate (number of crimes per 100,000 population)}$$

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City A, so we would expect it to have more burglaries, just as we would expect it to have more cars, more TVs, and any number of other factors. To compare the cities' burglary risk, we have to compare their burglary rates. We have already seen that City A has a burglary rate of 1,000 per 100,000 population. To determine City B's burglary rate, simply divide its number of burglaries (4,000) by its population size (500,000) and multiply this result by 100,000. When you do so, you will find that City B's burglary rate is 800 per 100,000 population, considerably lower than City A's rate of 1,000 per 100,000 population. Thus, although City B has more burglaries than City A, its burglary rate is actually lower, and we would say that City B is a safer city than City A in terms of the risk of burglary.

The use of crime rates is important for a second reason: to determine whether crime is rising, staying the same, or falling over time. If the population in an area rises every year, then a rise in the *number* of crimes does not necessarily mean that crime is "getting worse." Consider the following hypothetical example. In 2000, City C had 1,500 robberies and 400,000 people. Ten years later, in 2010, City C had 2,400 robberies and 700,000 people. Did robbery in City C get "better" or "worse" during those ten years? Its number of robberies did rise from 1,500 to 2,400, an increase of 900. But (do the math on your own) its robbery rate actually fell from 375 (per 100,000 people) in 2000 to just under 343 in 2010. Criminal justice researchers would thus conclude that City C was a bit safer from robbery in 2010 than in 2000, even though the *number* of robberies actually increased.

### *The Production of UCR Data*

UCR data are only as accurate as the information provided to the FBI. Unfortunately, the "production" of these data is imperfect for several reasons (Catalano 2006c; Lynch and Addington 2007). As noted earlier, UCR data are based on police reports. For this reason, the UCR calls the offenses on which it provides data **crimes known to the police**. How are these data generated? Based on citizen complaints of crime, police agencies provide monthly reports to the FBI of the number and types of crimes that occur in their jurisdictions (see **Table 2–3**).

Accurate crime data allow us to determine which areas have more crime and which have less crime. Urban areas like the one depicted here tend to have much higher crime rates than rural areas.

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**Table 2–3** **The Production of UCR Crime Data**

A crime is comitted
↓
The victim or a witness decides to report the crime to the police
↓
The police decide to record the crime as an official crime and to report it to the FBI

For each crime reported, the police tell the FBI whether someone was arrested for that crime or whether the crime was "cleared" for some other reason, including the death of the main suspect. For each arrest that occurs, the police tell the FBI the arrestee's age, gender, and race. UCR data are accurate only to the extent that the reporting process in each of these steps is accurate and complete. Next, we examine these steps in detail.

**Citizens' Complaints.** The most important step involves citizens reporting crime to the police. Police discover only about 3 percent of crimes on their own; thus they must rely on citizens to tell them about crimes they experience as victims or, occasionally, see as witnesses. But victims of serious crime report only 40 percent of all their victimizations to the police, for reasons discussed later in this chapter (Rand 2009).

This low level of reporting has important implications for the production of UCR crime data. As Robert M. O'Brien (2000:62) notes, "Part I and Part II crimes usually come to the attention of the police through citizens' complaints; thus, the reporting behavior of citizens plays a major role in determining the number of crimes known to the police." As a consequence, the number of crimes the UCR lists must always be lower—and usually is *much* lower—than the number of crimes that *actually* occur, with the large number of "hidden" crimes becoming what criminal justice researchers call the "dark figure of crime" (Biderman and Reiss 1967). To illustrate how this "dark figure" arises, suppose 1,000 Part I crimes occur in a town in a given year, but victims report only 400 of them (40 percent) to the police. Let us assume (although this does not always happen, as discussed later) the police record all these crimes and, in turn, report them to the FBI. Through the UCR, the FBI tells the public that 400 crimes occurred in the town in the last year when, in fact, 1,000 crimes occurred. The number of actual crimes is really 2.5 times higher than the rate that the public hears about, so the public may believe that the town is safer than it really is.

**Police Underrecording of Crime.** If victims' complaints of crime are problematic, so, too, are police recording and reporting procedures for the crimes victims do report to them. Once the police hear about a crime, they must determine whether a crime indeed occurred. This is called the *founding* stage. Sometimes citizens fabricate a "victimization" to get someone in trouble or to grab attention for themselves. Sometimes citizens sincerely feel they were victimized by a crime, but the circumstances do not lead the police to conclude that any criminal law was violated. These two types of false or mistaken reports are thought to account for 2 to 4 percent of all reports to the police. Even if police do believe a crime has occurred, they do not always record it as a crime. If they are very busy and think the crime was minor, they simply might not record it to save the time and energy of dong the paperwork. Although the extent of such nonrecording is unknown, some evidence indicates the police fail to record as much as one-third of all the crimes citizens report to them (Warner and Pierce 1993).

Another problem at the police recording stage stems from the fact that one criminal incident often includes many crimes. For example, suppose a burglar breaks into a house. The homeowner then comes home and surprises the burglar, who hits the homeowner with a club before escaping. At least two felonies have occurred here—burglary and aggravated assault. Under UCR procedures, however, the police record only the more serious of the two crimes, the assault. Thus, although a burglary also occurred, only the assault is counted, and the burglary disappears from the official crime count.

Yet another problem stems from the fact that police agencies "exist in a socio-political environment in which their performance and needs are often evaluated on the basis of crime statistics" (O'Brien 2000:63). A decrease in the crime rate makes the police appear to be doing a good job

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of controlling crime. An increase might make the police appear less effective, although they could also argue they need more resources to deal with the growing problem. Thus police agencies have a heavy investment in crime rate trends. At times, this investment has led individual police and entire agencies to "fudge" their crime reports—for example, by failing to record crimes they hear about or by downgrading serious crimes into misdemeanors (e.g., a burglary might be recorded as disturbing the peace). Either procedure makes it appear that fewer crimes were occurring.

Such fudging led to some serious scandals during the last two decades in cities such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Boca Raton (Florida), New York, and Philadelphia (J. K. Brown 1997; Butterfield 1998; Hart 2004; Parascandola and Levitt 2004). One officer in Boca Raton downgraded almost 400 felonies to misdemeanors, which artificially reduced the city's crime rate by more than 10 percent in 1997. In Philadelphia, the scandal was especially serious, as police there regularly downgraded approximately 10 percent of all serious crimes into minor ones and counted crimes as occurring only when they were finally recorded, not when they actually took place. These problems forced the FBI to disregard the city's 1996 and 1997 crime statistics. In another problem, the city's police sex-crimes unit had, since the early 1980s, either failed to record or downgraded thousands of reports of rape and sexual assault. The female victims had no idea this was happening, and the police never followed up on their complaints by trying to catch the men who had assaulted them. In some cases, these men later raped and sexually assaulted other women.

Fudging of crime data also occurs at college and university campuses, where, it is charged, college administrators and campus security try to keep crimes hidden from the public. Many educational institutions handle these incidents internally in student disciplinary hearings rather than tell the police about them. Although the federal government requires colleges and universities to provide accurate data on the crimes occurring on and nearby their campuses, at some schools many crimes—especially those occurring just off campus—do not get reported to the government (Jennings, Gover, and Pudrzynska 2007).

**Other Problems in Police Recording.** Several other problems also affect the accuracy of UCR crime data (Catalano 2006c; Lynch and Addington 2007). First, despite UCR instructions, police agencies around the country differ somewhat in their definitions of crime and, correspondingly, in their likelihood of recording an incident as a serious crime. For example, consider the difference between an aggravated assault and a simple assault. As Table 2–1 shows, an aggravated assault involves a serious injury and/or the use of a weapon, whereas a simple assault involves no weapon and only a minor injury. In many assaults, however, it is not clear whether an injury is serious or minor, and some police agencies are more likely than others to classify these assaults as aggravated rather than simple.

A related problem is that different police forces have different "styles" of policing (see Chapter 7); some take a sterner approach than others to law enforcement and are more likely to record every crime they hear about. Thus the style of a police force can affect whether citizens' complaints are translated into official crimes included in the UCR counts.

Yet another problem is that police are more likely to record crimes involving certain kinds of victims. In the 1960s, several researchers rode around in police cars and observed police encounters with citizens who said a crime had been committed against them. The police were more likely to record these complaints as a crime when the following were true: (1) the citizen complainant (victim) was polite; (2) the complainant and the suspect were strangers or only acquaintances; and (3) the complainant preferred the police to do something about the crime (Black 1970). Once again, we see that citizen reports of crime are not automatically translated into official crimes.

Finally, the police sometimes stage crackdowns in which they flood a high-crime neighborhood and make numerous arrests for illegal drug sales, prostitution, and other offenses. Correspondingly, the number of these crimes soars in police records and in the UCR, even though the actual number of these crimes has not changed at all.

**Arrest Statistics.** If UCR crime data are inaccurate, what about UCR arrest data? Recall that police inform the FBI of every arrest they make and of the age, gender, and race of every person they arrest. When someone is arrested for a crime, that crime is counted as being "cleared by arrest." Overall, the police clear approximately 20 percent of all Part I crimes, but the clearance

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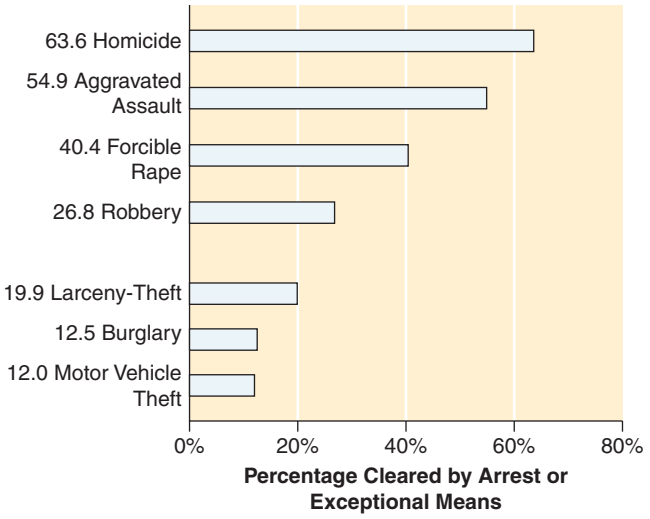


**Figure 2–1** **Clearance Rates for Violent and Property Crimes, 2007**
Source: Modified from "Crime in the United States, 2008: Offenses Cleared," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009.

rate varies greatly by the type of crime. It is highest for murder and non-negligent manslaughter and lowest for burglary; more generally, it is higher for violent crime and lower for property crime (**Figure 2–1**). If the police make arrests in only 20 percent of all official crimes, can we assume that the characteristics of those persons arrested—in terms of age, gender, and race—accurately reflect the characteristics of *all* offenders, including the vast majority who are *not* arrested?

Many criminal justice researchers say no. They point to the low clearance rates just noted and say that, in terms of numbers alone, it makes little sense to think the relatively few suspects who do get arrested represent the vast majority of criminals who escape arrest. These researchers further say that the characteristics of arrestees may reflect police racial and other biases at least as much as they reflect the kinds of persons who commit crimes in the first place. Pointing to evidence that police focus their resources on poor minority communities (Kent and Jacobs 2005), these critics add that it is no surprise that so many more arrests occur there than in wealthier white neighborhoods. Like UCR crime data, then, UCR arrest data might reflect police behavior more than crime reality; that is, they might yield a better picture of police attitudes and behavior than about the kinds of people who commit crime.

Other researchers acknowledge that many more people commit crimes than get arrested and concede that police bias does exist. Even so, they maintain that the characteristics of arrestees do fairly accurately represent those of suspects who do not get arrested (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2007). They reach this conclusion by drawing on the other sources of crime data described later in this chapter. If these researchers are correct, UCR arrest data give us a fairly good picture of who commits crime even if most crimes are not cleared by arrest.

### *The National Incident-Based Reporting System*

The UCR provides very little information on the characteristics of crimes, the settings in which they occur, the relationship between offenders and their victims, and other such matters. In a major exception, detailed data on murders and non-negligent homicides are supplied in the *Supplementary Homicide Reports* (SHR). These data include the victim–offender relationship in homicides; the race and ethnicity of offenders and victims in each homicide (so that we can tell, for example, what percentage of white homicide victims are killed by white offenders); and the use of a weapon, alcohol, and other drugs. Such detailed information has traditionally been lacking for other types of UCR offenses, however.

To remedy this problem, the UCR has begun the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) to supply much more complete data on criminal incidents (Addington 2008). Under this system, the police gather and report a good deal of information on crimes they record; this information parallels the types of topics included in the SHR. More than thirty states are now submitting, or preparing to submit, their crime information through NIBRS, and eventually NIBRS will replace the UCR. Although NIBRS will provide more complete information than the UCR, it will still be susceptible to the underreporting and underrecording problems that plague the UCR.

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### *Strengths and Weaknesses of the UCR*

The UCR has several strengths. It is the United States' official compilation of statistics on crime and criminals, and its data have been used in numerous research studies. The UCR also allows researchers to compare the crime rates in particular geographical areas (for example, urban versus rural crime rates) and to assess whether their crime rates are associated with social and physical characteristics such as their rates of poverty and unemployment.

Unfortunately, the UCR also has several weaknesses. The most important one, as we have seen, is that the UCR undercounts the true number of crimes. This problem makes it difficult to know whether changes in UCR crime rates reflect actual changes in the crime rate or changes in the likelihood of victims reporting their crimes or of police recording the crimes they hear from victims. For example, although the UCR rates of rape rose steadily in the 1970s and 1980s, this increase probably did *not* mean that the actual rate of rape was increasing. Instead, it reflected both greater reporting by rape victims and the greater likelihood of police taking their reports seriously (Baumer, Felson, and Messner 2003).

A related weakness is that UCR arrest data characteristics (i.e., age, gender, race) might not accurately reflect the characteristics of all criminal offenders. We return to this issue in the Under Investigation section following this chapter.

Finally, the UCR does not include data on crime committed by corporations. This omission sends the message that corporate crime is neither as important nor as serious as the "street" crime that the UCR covers. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 3, corporate crime can be more deadly and involve more financial loss than all street crime combined.

Despite the UCR's limitations, its strengths and widespread use in research mean that it will remain an important source of crime data for many years to come. The UCR provides part of the picture of crime in the United States, but only one part. In an effort to improve our understanding of crime, other sources of crime information have been developed, as we discuss next.

## The National Crime Victimization Survey

Concern over the UCR's limitations led the U.S. federal government to develop the National Crime Survey, now known as the **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**, in 1973. Each year since then, the Census Bureau, acting on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, has surveyed tens of thousands of people age 12 or older from randomly selected households across the nation. In 2008, the NCVS sample consisted of about 42,000 households and 78,000 people age 12 or older. The NCVS's response rate is extremely high: In 2008, 90 percent of eligible households and 86 percent of eligible individuals took part (Rand 2009).

The household residents are asked several questions to determine whether they have been a victim in the previous six months of several kinds of crimes. These crimes include robbery, rape and sexual assault, aggravated and simple assault, and personal theft such as pickpocketing and purse snatching; the NCVS groups these offenses together and calls them *personal crimes*. Someone from the household is also asked whether the family was the victim of a household burglary, other household theft, or motor vehicle theft; the NCVS calls these *property crimes*. To avoid influencing responses, interviewers do not use any of these crime terms in their questions and instead read descriptions of the crimes.

If respondents say that they have experienced a personal crime in the past six months, they are then asked several questions about the offense, including whether and how they were threatened or hurt; when and where their victimization occurred; whether a weapon was involved and, if so, what type; how well they knew the offender before the victimization; and whether they reported the offense to the police and, if not, why not. When respondents report a household victimization, they are asked further questions about it, including the value of the item(s) stolen and whether someone was at home at the time the theft occurred. (Chapter 5 further discusses the characteristics of crime victims and the process of victimization.)

Because the NCVS is a random sample of the entire nation, its results can be generalized to the rest of the U.S. population. For example, if 5 percent of NCVS respondents say their homes

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**Table 2–4** **Number of Offenses, NCVS and UCR Data, 2008**

| Type of Crime | NCVS | UCR |
|---|---|---|
| Violent Crime | 4,856,510 | 1,382,012 |
| Homicide | — | 16,272 |
| Forcible rape[a] | 203,830 | 89,000 |
| Aggravated assault | 859,940 | 834,885 |
| Simple assault | 3,260,920 | — |
| Robbery | 551,830 | 441,855 |
| Property Crime | 16,455,890 | 9,767,915 |
| Burglary | 3,188,620 | 2,222,196 |
| Larceny-theft[b] | 12,472,110 | 6,588,873 |
| Motor vehicle theft | 795,160 | 956,846 |
| Total Offenses | 21,312,400 | 11,149,927 |

a. NCVS number for "rape" includes sexual assaults.

b. Includes NCVS category of "personal theft."

**Source:** Data from Pastore, Ann L. and Kathleen Maguire, eds. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, tables 3.2.2008 and 3.106.2008 [Online]. Available: http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook.

have been burglarized, we can be fairly sure that approximately 5 percent of *all* U.S. homes have been burglarized. This fact allows NCVS researchers to make two important national estimates. The first is the actual number of victimizations in the United States. To use our burglary example, NCVS researchers would multiply the number of all U.S. households by 5 percent to estimate the number of household burglaries in the entire country. The second estimate is the *rate* of victimization per 1,000 persons age 12 or older (for personal crime) or per 1,000 households (for property crime). To use our burglary example, a 5 percent finding in the NCVS translates to a rate of 50 victims per 1,000 households.

Although both the NCVS and the UCR measure street crimes, it is important to recognize differences in which crimes they measure (Lynch and Addington 2007). The NCVS does not include homicide (because homicide victims obviously cannot report their victimization), arson, and any commercial crime such as shoplifting, robberies of store clerks, or after-hours burglaries of businesses. In another difference, the NCVS includes simple assaults, but the UCR's data on Part I crimes excludes them. Also, the NCVS includes both sexual assault and rape, whereas the UCR's Part I list of offenses includes only rape. Finally, the NCVS measures personal victimizations only on people age 12 or older; the UCR includes crimes that happen to children younger than age 12.

These differences mean that, to some extent, comparing crime data from the UCR and NCVS is like comparing apples and oranges. At the same time, meaningful comparisons do exist. **Table 2–4** lists the numbers of UCR offenses known to the police and the number estimated by the NCVS. Even allowing for the differences between the two data sources, it is obvious that the NCVS estimates that many more millions of crimes occur each year than become officially known to the police. As noted earlier, a major reason for this huge disparity is that so many victims do not report their crimes to the police.

Why do victims not report the crimes committed against them? The reasons vary by the type of victimization, but approximately 19 percent of violent crime victims say they did not report their crime because it was a "private or personal matter"; 20 percent say the offender was unsuccessful; 14 percent say they reported the crime to "another official"; 7 percent say the crime was not important enough to report; 6 percent believed the police would not want to be bothered; 4 percent were afraid of reprisal by the offender; and 4 percent felt it would be too time-consuming or inconvenient to report the crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008a).

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of the NCVS*

The NCVS has several strengths and weaknesses (Groves and Cork 2009). Its major strength is it that provides more accurate estimates than the UCR of the number of crimes. As Table 2–4 shows, many more crimes appear in the NCVS than in the UCR, and most researchers do believe that the NCVS is the more reliable source of information on the number of crimes.

A second strength of the NCVS stems from its greater accuracy: It is probably a better barometer than the UCR of changes in crime rates. As we saw earlier, we cannot be sure whether changes in UCR crime rates reflect changes in actual crime rates or whether they indicate changes in police or citizen reporting practices. For this reason, many researchers use NCVS data rather than UCR data to measure crime rate trends for the years since the NCVS was implemented in 1973.

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Despite the importance of homicides, such as the one shown here, they are not covered by the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which obviously cannot interview dead victims. Although the NCVS yields very valuable information about crime victims and criminal victimization, it provides no information about homicides.

A third strength is that the NCVS provides rich information on the context of criminal victimization and its effects on crime victims. Before the NCVS was established, the field of criminal justice knew much less about victims' experiences and the process of victimization than it does now.

Despite its considerable strengths, the NCVS also has several limitations. First, it does not include two very important types of crime—commercial crime and white-collar crime. In addition, it does not cover crimes whose victims are younger than age 12. Because of these omissions, the NCVS itself underestimates the actual amount of crime in the United States even if it provides more accurate estimates than the UCR does.

Second, NCVS respondents may forget about at least some of their victimizations, or they may simply decide they do not want to tell the NCVS interviewers about them. This latter problem may be especially prevalent with crimes such as rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Whether respondents forget about their victimizations or just decide to remain silent, the NCVS fails to uncover these crimes and again underestimates the actual number of crimes.

If these problems mean the NCVS might underestimate the actual number of crimes, other problems might lead it to provide an overestimate. Some respondents might mistakenly interpret some of their experiences as crimes when, in fact, the circumstances would not fit the definition of a crime. Other respondents might mistakenly "telescope" crimes by telling NCVS interviewers about victimizations that happened *before* the survey's six-month reporting period. Despite these possibilities, underestimation is probably a more likely problem in the NCVS than overestimation.

## Self-Report Surveys

Although both the UCR and NCVS provide useful information on crimes, they do not provide much information on offenders. **Self-report surveys** provide such information and help uncover the "dark figure of crime" noted earlier. These surveys are typically given to adolescents, usually students in high school classes, but a few notable surveys have been administered to random samples of all U.S. non-institutionalized youths. Whatever their venue, self-report surveys ask whether respondents have committed various offenses within some time period (commonly called a *reference period*), usually the last twelve months, and, if so, how often they committed the offense. They also ask several questions about respondents' personal backgrounds, including their relationships with their parents and friends and their involvement in school activities.

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The first type of question allows researchers to determine both the prevalence and the incidence of offenses. **Prevalence** refers to the percent of respondents who have committed an offense at least once within the reference period; **incidence** refers to the number of offenses committed per respondent. For example, in a small survey of 200 respondents, suppose 40 individuals admit to having damaged school property in the past year and further report that they had done so 75 times altogether. The prevalence rate for this sample is 0.20 (40/200), or 20 percent, while the incidence rate is 0.375 (75/200) offenses per person.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of Self-Report Surveys*

Like the UCR and NCVS, self-report surveys have several strengths and weaknesses. Their strengths stem from the very nature of their research design, which "allows researchers to collect detailed information about individual offenders" (O'Brien 2000:70). Self-report surveys have been able to shed much light on the dark figure of crime by revealing both the prevalence and the incidence of offending. This fact, along with their inclusion of items on so many aspects of their respondents' lives, has also enabled these instruments to shed much light on the causes of delinquency and, by extension, street crime in general.

Self-report surveys also have some weaknesses (Groves and Cork 2009). Perhaps the most important problem is that respondents might not respond truthfully when asked whether they have committed various offenses. They may refuse to admit to an offense; they may say they committed an offense when, in fact, they did not; or they may honestly forget whether they committed an offense (and how many of each offense) in the reference period. Thus the *validity* of the respondents' answers is a potential problem. Researchers have assessed this validity by comparing respondents' answers to police and court records, and they have found that respondents' answers are fairly accurate (Paschall, Ornstein, and Flewelling 2001)—but they have also found some discrepancies. In particular, respondents sometimes report being arrested when they were not arrested and also fail to report being arrested when they were arrested (Kirk 2006). Overall, though, their answers are considered accurate enough that self-report data are probably the most common type of data used today in tests of criminological theories.

In another problem, recall that most self-report surveys have used samples of adolescents in high school or non-institutionalized youths from around the country. This research design means that self-report surveys omit certain groups of youths—those who have dropped out of high school, who are homeless, or who are in juvenile detention facilities—who might have especially high rates of juvenile offending. Thus self-report studies might themselves underestimate the prevalence and incidence of offending.

A third problem was truer in the early days of self-report surveys than now. The early surveys failed to include questions about serious offenses such as rape and robbery, as researchers believed that these offenses were so rare and so serious that too few respondents would admit to having committed them. Later surveys began to include serious offenses and have helped us to understand the extent and predictors of such behavior. Because some of these offenses are so rarely committed, however, they remain somewhat difficult to study even with self-report data.

## Field Research

The UCR, NCVS, and self-report surveys are useful because they provide different kinds of numerical data on crime, offenders, and/or victims. A fourth source of information about crime, field research, does not provide numerical data but is important nonetheless. **Field research** (also called ethnographic research) involves intensive interviewing and/or extended observation of criminal offenders and the settings in which they live. It can yield a much richer understanding than the other three sources of what makes criminals behave as they do, how they interact with other offenders, how they decide when to commit a particular crime, and other issues.

Field research also has important limitations (Babbie 2011). First, its results cannot be generalized beyond the subjects studied. However rich a portrait a field study yields of its criminal subjects, we cannot be sure whether this portrait can be generalized to any other group of offenders. Second, this type of research is difficult to carry out. As you might expect, criminals do not like being interviewed, and field researchers may put themselves at some risk when they approach

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them. Finally, field researchers may unwittingly influence the behavior they observe. Their very presence may prompt their offender subjects to change how they normally act.

Despite these problems, researchers have been able to conduct many field studies of active burglars, robbers, and other offenders (Graham and Wells 2003; Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright 2003; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Steffensmeier and Ulmer 2005; Valdez and Sifaneck 2004). In a related kind of study that does not occur "in the field," other researchers have interviewed offenders who are incarcerated or on probation or parole (Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez 2006; Presser 2003). Both types of studies have helped us understand the backgrounds and motivations of offenders and the dynamics of their criminal behavior.

## Explaining Crime

As the story of Seung-Hui Cho reminds us, a critical question in the study of criminal justice is why crime occurs. Are parents too permissive? Do criminals have defective genes? Are poverty and overcrowding to blame? Unless we can determine the causes of crime and develop the best possible policies to reduce it, more people will continue to commit crime. Researchers in many disciplines have tried to understand why crime takes place, and we now turn to the explanations they have developed. **Table 2–5** summarizes the explanations we discuss.

**Table 2–5** **Explanations of Crime**

**Rational Choice, Deterrence, and Routine Activities Theories**

*Rational Choice:* People commit crime after carefully weighing the potential rewards and risks of doing so.

*Deterrence:* Potential criminals can be deterred from committing crime by an increase in the likelihood of arrest and punishment.

*Routine Activities:* Crime is more likely when three factors converge in time and place: (1) motivated offenders, (2) attractive targets in the form of property or people, and (3) the absence of guardianship in the form of potential witnesses who can come to the aid of the victim.

**Biological and Psychological Theories**

***Biological***

*Genes and Heredity:* Criminal behavior is transmitted from parents to children through one or more genes that predispose individuals to criminality.

*Hormones:* High levels of testosterone produce criminal behavior in males, and premenstrual syndrome produces criminal behavior in females.

*Pregnancy and Birth Complications:* Problems during pregnancy and child birth lead to developmental problems in newborns and young children and, in turn, to a greater likelihood of delinquency and crime when the individuals are older.

***Psychological***

*Psychoanalytic:* Crime results from negative childhood experiences that cause an imbalance among the id, ego, and superego. More generally, crime is the result of mental illness.

*Personality Problems:* Impulsiveness, irritability, and other such problems underlie much antisocial behavior in children and their later criminality.

**Sociological Theories**

*Social Ecology:* The physical and social characteristics of communities contribute to their crime rates.

*Blocked Opportunity and Anomie:* Crime results from the frustration stemming from lack of opportunity in a society that values economic success.

*Peer Influences and Learning:* Crime is the result of socialization by deviant peers who influence an individual to adopt their values and behavior.

*Social Controls:* Crime results from weak social bonds to family, school, and other social institutions and from a lack of self-control.

*Critical Theories:* Bias in the criminal justice system leads some individuals and behaviors to be more likely than others to be considered deviant. Crime is the result of class and gender inequality.

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## Rational Choice, Deterrence, and Routine Activities Theories

Many scholars today favor **rational choice theory**, which views criminals as committing crime from their own **free will** by carefully weighing the potential rewards and risks before deciding to break the law (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury 2011). Much of the public shares this view and holds a more punitive attitude toward criminals as a result (Sims 2003).

An offshoot of rational choice theory is **deterrence theory**, which assumes that potential criminals can be deterred from breaking the law by increasing the threat of arrest and punishment. Since the 1970s, this assumption has guided U.S. criminal justice policy, which has emphasized longer prison terms, the building of many more prisons, and increases in the number and powers of the police. Although the views of deterrence theory sound quite plausible, criminal justice researchers dispute whether the increased use of arrest and imprisonment has, in fact, deterred criminals and reduced the crime rate (Walker 2010). Chapter 11 discusses this issue in greater detail.

Another offshoot of rational choice theory is **routine activities theory**, which has stimulated much exciting research since its inception about three decades ago (Felson and Boba 2010). Briefly, this explanation says that crime and victimization are more likely when three factors converge in time and place: (1) motivated offenders, (2) attractive targets in the form of property or people, and (3) the absence of guardianship in the form of potential witnesses who can come

Spotlight On

## Crime and the Economy

In the wake of the U.S. economic recession that began in 2008 and continued into 2010, scholars, elected officials, and criminal justice professionals began to worry that the economic downturn would cause a crime upturn. The evidence of an economy–crime link, however, is far from clear.

For example, the crime rate *declined* during the 1990s, when the economy thrived, but it *increased* during the 1960s, when the economy also thrived. Also, crime *decreased* in several cities during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the economy obviously was very poor. Finally, it declined during the first half of 2009, when the economy was in a serious recession.

If crime does not always increase when the economy suffers, then routine activities theory might provide a clue for this surprising "non-outcome." As noted in the text, this theory says that crime and victimization result from the simultaneous occurrence of motivated offenders, attractive targets, and lack of guardianship. Although offenders might become more motivated when economic times are tough, potential targets may decrease in number and availability. Why might this happen? When the economy suffers, people are obviously more likely to be unemployed and have less money to spend. As a consequence, they probably spend more time at home. That factor, in turn, decreases the likelihood that they will be victims of crime outside the home, and it also decreases the likelihood that their homes will be burglarized (because someone is more likely to be at home). Ironically, then, a lack of money, however unfortunate this situation is, may help keep people safe from criminal victimization.

Although the evidence of an economy–crime link is not as clear as we might have supposed, some evidence of crime increases during economic downturns does exist. As sociologist Richard Rosenfeld, who has studied this issue, explains, "Every recession since the late '50s has been associated with an increase in crime and, in particular, property crime and robbery, which would be most responsive to changes in economic conditions." Usually, he adds, it takes about one year for an economic downturn to produce a crime increase.

To the extent that a worsening economy may increase crime, this consequence underscores the importance of individuals' and families' financial status for their likelihood of committing crime. This, in turn, underscores the importance of the social and economic environment for understanding crime rates and criminal behavior.

Sources: Hauser 2008; Wilson 2009.

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to the aid of the victim. Thus, when someone who needs money sees a well-dressed person alone in a deserted neighborhood at night, a robbery is more likely to occur than in the daytime on a crowded street.

A routine activities perspective helps explain many crime rate trends. For example, the introduction of automated teller machines (ATMs) and proliferation of convenience stores probably led to more robberies because they were new attractive targets that often lack guardianship, and robbers responded accordingly. A routine activities view also suggests several steps might be taken to reduce crime. Called *situational crime prevention,* these steps involve making targets less attractive and increasing guardianship (Knepper 2009). For example, lighting could be improved at outdoor ATMs and in other areas where people are vulnerable at night to criminals.

## Biological and Psychological Explanations

Biological and psychological views obviously differ in many respects, but both assume that the roots of crime lie within the individual rather than in the social environment and involve internal forces of which offenders might not be aware. Simply put, these explanations say that criminals are biologically or psychologically different from noncriminals. More to the point, they suggest that certain biological and psychological problems make people more likely to commit crime and that criminals are more likely than noncriminals to have these problems.

### *Biological Views*

Contemporary research addresses several biological factors. We do not have the space to discuss all of them here, but rather will focus on hypotheses related to genes, hormones, and pregnancy and childbirth complications.

**Genes and Heredity.** Although no specific gene for criminal behavior has been located, many scientists think crime has at least some genetic basis. They infer this relationship from studies of identical twins. Because such twins have identical genes, we would expect them to behave very similarly if genes affect their behavior. Many twin studies have found that, if one twin has

Some scholars think crime has a genetic basis. Studies of identical twins tend to support this view, but twins' similar behavior may also stem from their similar social environments.

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a history of criminal behavior, often the other twin does as well. Although not all twin studies have confirmed this pattern, overall their findings do lead many researchers to believe that some unknown gene or genes help produce criminal behavior (Beaver 2009).

Other researchers question whether a strong genetic effect on crime should be inferred from twin studies (Guo 2005; Moffitt and Caspi 2006). One concern is that identical twins are similar in many respects other than their genes. They are socialized the same way by their parents, have the same friends, and spend much time with each other. Given that all of these similarities may lead them to have similar behavior when it comes to crime, these researchers say a strong genetic role in crime cannot be inferred.

As a middle ground, some researchers suggest that genes and the social environment interact in producing crime: Genes may predispose some individuals to crime, but this predisposition is not "activated" unless problems in the social environment exist (Jacobson and Rowe 2000). Because no consensus yet exists, research on heredity and crime will continue to be a fascinating topic in the years ahead.

**Hormones.** Excessive levels of the so-called male hormone, testosterone, are often mentioned as a reason why some men might be especially likely to commit serious crime (Booth et al. 2006). To test this hypothesis, researchers have assessed whether males with different testosterone levels also differ in their levels of criminal behavior and other forms of aggression. Several such studies have found a link between higher testosterone levels and more extensive histories of crime and aggression. Although this correlation might suggest that testosterone produces aggression, it is also possible that aggression (and the dominance it involves) increases testosterone. This possibility has caused some researchers to doubt that higher levels of testosterone in humans produce higher levels of aggression (Sapolsky 1998).

In women, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) has been linked in some research to greater aggression. The idea here is that some women in their premenstrual phase become extremely irritable, tense, and/or depressed and that these changes increase their chances of becoming violent. Although an early study of women prisoners in Great Britain supposedly found this effect (Dalton 1961), other researchers soon challenged the study's methodology. Thus a causal link between PMS and aggression cannot be assumed to exist (Harry and Balcer 2006).

**Pregnancy and Childbirth Complications.** A promising line of research concerns the many problems that can occur during pregnancy and childbirth (McGloin, Pratt, and Piquero 2006). If a fetus's neurological development does not proceed normally, a newborn can suffer long-lasting cognitive, emotional, and behavioral impairment. Several types of problems, including poor prenatal nutrition and the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs by the pregnant woman, can affect this neurological development. If a birth is especially difficult, the baby may suffer a lack of oxygen and other problems that can also affect neurological development and again lead to various impairments. These impairments have, in turn, been implicated in aggressive behavior in children and later criminality (Loeber and Farrington 2001). Thus pregnancy and birth complications may help to produce criminal behavior many years later.

### *Psychological Views*

As noted earlier, proponents of psychological views join with advocates of biological views in saying that the causes of crime come from inside the individual. In general, these internal problems are thought to stem from childhood experiences and difficulties.

**Psychoanalytic Explanations.** Drawing on the work of the great scholar Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), psychoanalytic views assume that criminal behavior stems from the failure of individuals to adjust their instinctive needs to the dictates of society (Bartol and Bartol 2011). In particular, Freud and his followers assume that the individual personality is composed of three components: the *id,* the instinctive part of the personality that selfishly seeks pleasure; the *ego,* the rational part of the personality that recognizes the negative aspects of pure selfishness; and the

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*superego,* the part of the personality that represents society's moral code and acts as the individual's conscience. These three components need to be in harmony for an individual to be mentally healthy. When this is not so—usually because of abnormal early childhood experiences—mental disorders, including criminal behavior, can result.

While psychoanalytic explanations sound appealing, they are difficult to prove or disprove. For example, if a researcher studies someone with a history of crime, the researcher might conclude the person's superego is too weak; if the person's criminality is used as evidence of a weak superego, however, the researcher is guilty of circular reasoning. Psychoanalytic views also imply that a person with a history of criminal behavior suffers from a mental disorder. Many criminal justice researchers dispute this point. While conceding that some criminals do have mental disorders, they argue that most criminals are not psychologically abnormal despite their history of crime (Bernard, Snipes, and Gerould 2009).

Despite these controversies, psychoanalytic explanations remain valuable because of their emphasis on early childhood experiences. Certain problems in early childhood can eventually lead to criminality and other behavioral problems. Regardless of the continuing value of psychoanalytic explanations, much research today focuses on negative childhood experiences and their consequences for later behavior (Welsh and Farrington 2007).

**Personality Problems.** One consequence of such negative experiences might be various personality problems, including impulsiveness, irritability, and hyperactivity, which are thought to underlie aggression and other behavior problems in children. These behavioral problems are, in turn, precursors for juvenile delinquency and adult criminality (Wright, Tibbetts, and Daigle 2008).

To assess the role that personality problems play in criminality, it is important to first determine whether offenders do, in fact, have "worse" personalities than nonoffenders. To do so, many researchers use *personality inventories*—lists of true–false and other statements—to which subjects respond. These inventories have been administered to offenders in juvenile and adult institutions, and they often find a high number of such problems in these individuals. Nevertheless, because personality problems may stem at least partly from the offenders' institutionalization, this type of study leaves the nature of the personality–offending link unclear. A better research design would study children from infancy through at least young adulthood to see whether personality differences at various ages predict *later* offending. A notable, ongoing research project in New Zealand has used this research design, and it finds that personality problems in childhood do predict later offending and other problems (Caspi et al. 2003). To the extent that this relationship holds true, social policies and programs that help prevent these personality problems from emerging in childhood should help reduce delinquency and crime in later stages of the life course (Welsh and Farrington 2007).

## Sociological Explanations

Unlike their biological and psychological counterparts, sociological explanations say the causes of criminal behavior lie *outside* the individual in the social environment. The social environment does not totally determine who will commit crime, but it does have an important influence. Several sociological explanations exist, and we examine them in some detail.

### *Social Ecology Explanations*

**Social ecology** approaches address the physical and social characteristics of communities that increase their rates of crime and victimization (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury 2011). Rodney Stark (1987) calls these approaches "kinds of places" explanations rather than "kinds of people" explanations. Different types of people, he notes, can move into and out of various neighborhoods, but certain types of neighborhoods will generally have higher crime rates no matter which kinds of people live there. The task of ecological approaches is to explain which place (i.e., location) characteristics produce higher crime rates.

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Stark (1987) says that several place characteristics matter, including residential density. In neighborhoods where residences are very close together, "good kids" are more apt to come into contact with "bad kids" and, therefore, are more likely to break the law. Areas with another type of residential density, crowded households, will also have higher crime rates, in part because adolescents in these households often feel the need for "elbow room" and leave their homes to hang out with their friends; once away from home, they have greater opportunity to get into trouble—and some do so.

Other ecological factors also matter for neighborhood crime rates (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury 2011; Sampson 2006). Neighborhoods with higher rates of collective efficacy, in which neighbors watch one another's children, have lower crime rates. Neighborhoods with low rates of participation in voluntary organizations such as churches and community groups and higher numbers of bars and taverns have higher crime rates. Taken together, ecological explanations help us understand the reasons why some neighborhoods have higher crime rates than other neighborhoods. They suggest that criminality stems to a large extent from the social and physical characteristics of the places in which individuals live.

### *Blocked Opportunity and Anomie*

Much sociological research emphasizes the importance of poverty in determining criminal behavior. While several poverty-based explanations exist, most assume that poverty in a society such as the United States, which places such great value on economic success, is especially frustrating for the poor, who feel relative deprivation as they compare themselves to other, wealthier Americans (Webber 2007). Disadvantaged individuals face great difficulties in lifting themselves out of poverty: They have relatively little education, their children go to low-quality schools, and so forth. Their opportunity to move up the socioeconomic ladder, in short, is blocked by all sorts of factors, and such blocked opportunity is said to create "angry aggression" that translates into violence and other crime (Bernard 1990).

**Merton's Anomie Theory.** This explanation echoes back to Robert K. Merton's (1938) classic **anomie theory** of deviance. Merton reasoned that the United States places much value on economic success and on working hard to achieve such success. The poor become frustrated as they realize that economic success for them is elusive: No matter how hard they work, they will have trouble achieving the "American dream" of economic success. Merton referred to their failure to become economically successful through hard work as anomie. Given this frustration, five adaptations to anomie are possible (see **Table 2–6**).

Despite their frustration, Merton noted, most poor people continue to accept the goal of economic success and continue to work hard. These conformists do not break the law. Other people continue to accept the goal of economic success and reject the means of working. Instead, they *innovate* with new means by engaging in forms of theft to obtain wealth and possessions. Others continue to work at a job but have lost any ambition to become economically acceptable. Work has for them become a ritual. Some poor people give up on making money and give up on working, instead turning to drugs or alcohol for solace and/or living in the streets. Merton called their adaptation retreatism. Finally, some poor people reject both the goal of economic success and the means of working and engage in rebellion to achieve a new society with new goals and values.

Merton's theory, first presented in 1938, was for many years the most popular sociological theory of deviance and crime. It fell out of favor for several

**Table 2–6** **Merton's Anomie Theory of Deviance**

| | Economic Success | |
|---|---|---|
| **Working at a Job** | **Accept** | **Reject** |
| ***Accept*** | Conformity | Ritualism |
| ***Reject*** | Innovation | Retreatism |

Note: A fifth category, *rebellion*, involves rejection of both the goal of economic success and the means of working and, further, efforts at bringing about a new society with new goals and values.

**Source:** Adapted from R. K. Merton, *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 3(1938): 672–682.

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reasons, including its inability to explain most types of violence, which are not committed for economic reasons. While the poor may commit violence out of "angry aggression," that reason was not part of Merton's explanation. Nevertheless, anomie theory has been revived in recent years as researchers have placed new emphasis on failures to reach the American dream and other important goals as significant reasons for higher crime rates among the poor (Agnew 2007; Messner and Rosenfeld 2007).

**Differential Opportunity Theory.** In 1960, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960) presented an extension of Merton's anomie theory called **differential opportunity theory**. Going beyond Merton's notion of blocked opportunity for economic success, Cloward and Ohlin noted that the poor also have different levels of access to illegitimate means, leading to differential opportunities to achieve economic success through such means. Their degree of access depends on the types of neighborhoods in which they live. In some neighborhoods, a thriving criminal subculture with strong organized crime groups exists. In these neighborhoods, the poor who are so inclined can easily find opportunities to commit crime to obtain money or possessions. Other neighborhoods provide fewer such opportunities; in these areas, *random* violence or drug and alcohol use are much more common. Cloward and Ohlin's emphasis on differential opportunities to achieve economic success and to do so through illegitimate means helps to understand why crime rates differ among the poor and between the poor and the nonpoor.

### *Peer Influences and Learning*

An important part of the social environment, according to both psychologists and sociologists, is the various people with whom we interact. The greatest influence on young children is their parents. As children grow into preteens and then adolescents, however, their friends become increasingly important. Recognition of this fact has long prompted researchers to consider the role played by peer influences in delinquent behavior. Although many types of learning theories formulated by both psychologists and sociologists exist, all of them emphasize that juveniles *learn* to break the law—or, more specifically, learn attitudes and values that help them decide to break the law—from their friends and acquaintances. They may also break the law simply because they want to conform to their friends' behavior so as to "fit into the crowd" and avoid ridicule or even the loss of their friendship (Akers and Sellers 2008).

**Sutherland's Differential Association Theory.** In sociology, the classic learning explanation is Edwin Sutherland's (1939) **differential association theory**. According to Sutherland, criminal behavior is learned from interacting with other people instead of being the result of biological factors. Such learning encompasses not only certain values and attitudes that justify breaking the law, but also specific techniques for committing crime. Sutherland's theory says that when individuals acquire from their friends an "excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law," they are more likely to break the law themselves.

Sutherland and other learning theorists suggest that crime stems from one of the most important, normal social processes: socialization. Although most people are socialized to become law-abiding members of society, some people are socialized to become law-breaking members. Just as adolescents' friends influence them in all sorts of ways—for example, their taste in music and clothing—so do they influence them in many aspects of their behavior, including deviant behavior. Supporting this view, many studies have revealed that adolescents with delinquent friends are more likely than those with fewer or no such friends to become delinquent themselves. Some scholars consider the effect of delinquent peers to be a more important cause of delinquency than any other factor (Akers and Jensen 2006).

**Peers Versus Mass Media.** One interesting controversy concerns the impact of peer influences compared to that of the mass media. In saying that adolescents learn to be criminals from interacting with their friends, Sutherland implied that the mass media had little, if any, impact on crime. Of course, in formulating his explanation more than sixty years ago, Sutherland was

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writing long before the days of TV, modern music and movies, and the Internet. Today the public is concerned about the impact of mass media on youth violence, and many researchers have examined this issue.

In some studies, children and college students are shown violent videos and then watched as they play (children) or given questionnaires to fill out (college students). When compared to control groups who watch a nonviolent video, the children tend to play more violently, and the college students tend to reflect more violent attitudes in their answers to the questionnaire. In other research, random samples of respondents are asked in self-report studies about the TV shows they watch, the movies they see, the music they listen to, and the video games they play. Those who report exposure to violent media in any of these forms also report being more violent in their behavior. Such studies have led many researchers to conclude that violence in mass media has a strong influence on youth violence (Surette 2007).

Other scholars reject this conclusion, calling it premature (Trend 2007). The violence found among the participants in the studies involving children and college students who watch violent videos, they say, is only short term and does not necessarily mean that mass media portrayals of violence have a strong influence in the "real world." They add that the correlations found in self-report studies between mass media exposure and violent behavior also do not confirm a cause-and-effect relationship (Surette 2007). Perhaps individuals interested in violence are more likely to want to watch violent movies or play violent video games. No doubt the link between mass media violence and actual youth violence will continue to arouse controversy for some years to come.

### *Social Controls*

An important goal of any society is to control its members' behavior. Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of the founders of sociology, recognized that a society is more stable if it has strong social bonds and can socialize its members to respect and conform to society's moral codes of behavior. Reflecting Durkheim's insight, several sociological explanations highlight the factors that *keep* people from becoming deviant. In this sense, they represent the flip side of the explanations discussed so far that focus on the factors that *influence* people to become deviant. By understanding which factors help induce conformity, we can better understand those that induce criminality.

Sociologists focus on two sorts of social controls: internal or personal ones such as the ability to delay gratification, and external ones found in an individual's social environment. Some of these external ones operate at the neighborhood level, as our earlier discussion of collective efficacy illustrates, whereas others operate at the family and school levels.

**Hirschi's Social Bonding Theory.** Family and school bonds lie at the heart of Travis Hirschi's (1969) **social bonding theory**, which says that strong bonds to parents and schools help keep adolescents from becoming delinquent. These bonds have four dimensions: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. *Attachment* refers to how close we feel to our parents and teachers and care about their opinions. The more we care about them, the guiltier we would feel if we violate their norms. *Commitment* refers to the importance we place on these activities. The stronger our commitment to these activities, the less likely we are to break the law. *Involvement* refers to the amount of time we devote to conventional activities. The more time we devote to them, the less time we have to get into trouble. Finally, *belief* refers to the extent to which individuals believe in society's norms. The more we believe in these norms, the less likely we are to break the law.

Supporting social bonding theory, many studies have found that adolescents with the strongest social bonds to their parents and schools are, indeed, less likely to be delinquent (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury 2011). Citing a chicken-or-egg problem, some critics question whether this relationship shows that these social bonds reduce delinquency, as the theory assumes, or whether it suggests that delinquency weakens adolescents' bonds to their parents and schools. Despite this uncertainty, most sociologists would probably agree that social bonding reduces delinquency.

Social bonding theory has stimulated research on the role played by the family and schools in delinquency. Many studies have documented the importance of family interaction for delinquency

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Many studies find that strong bonds between parents and their children help reduce the probability of delinquency when children reach adolescence. The results of these studies support Hirschi's social bonding theory.

and other antisocial behavior: Harmonious families help produce well-behaved children, whereas conflict-ridden families are more apt to produce children with behavioral problems (Ford 2009). Research is less clear on the importance of *family structure*. Some researchers have found that children from single-parent households are at only slightly greater risk for delinquency, usually drinking and drug use and status offenses such as skipping school (Wells and Rankin 1991). The major problem with single-parent arrangements, these researchers say, is that they are more likely to be low-income households—not that a single parent cannot be a good parent. Other researchers insist that children of single parents are at much greater risk for delinquency because the one parent is less able to supervise the children and to be a good parent in other respects (Simons, Simons, and Wallace 2007). No doubt research on family structure and delinquency will continue to provoke debate for many years to come.

Researchers have also documented the importance of schooling for delinquency. Here the evidence is fairly clear: Students who get good grades, who like their schools and teachers, and who are involved in school activities are much less likely to be delinquent than those who get poor grades, who dislike their schools and teachers, and who are less involved in school activities (Ford 2009). But the chicken-or-egg question remains a problem in interpreting this evidence: Are the good students less delinquent because they *are* good students, or are delinquents less likely to be good students because they are delinquents?

**Hirschi and Gottfredson's Self-Control Theory.** Hirschi subsequently developed a **self-control theory** of delinquency with colleague Michael Gottfredson (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). According to this theory, a lack of self-control is responsible for all forms of crime. People who cannot restrain themselves, who are impulsive, and who can only live for the present are much more likely to commit crime than those who have more self-control in all these respects. Following up on Hirschi's original emphasis on family bonds, Gottfredson and Hirschi further said that low self-control stems from poor parenting starting in infancy and extending into adolescence.

In support of the self-control theory, much research finds that people who score low on various measures of self-control are more likely to have broken the law (Piquero and Bouffard

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2007). However, questions about the theory remain (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury 2011). A chicken-or-egg problem might exist in some self-control studies: Does low self-control promote criminality, or does criminality lead to low self-control? Critics also take issue with the theory's assumptions that low self-control explains all crime and that low self-control is much more important than other factors such as poverty and peer influences in determining propensity to commit crime. Much white-collar crime, they say, involves *high* degrees of self-control; poverty, negative peer influences, and many other factors also matter greatly for street crime. As this brief summary should indicate, self-control theory has proven quite provocative since its formulation and will continue to generate debate.

### *Critical Views*

If a robber kills someone, the criminal justice system would ideally do its best to arrest and prosecute the robber for murder. If convicted, the robber would likely get a long prison term or even the death penalty. In contrast, a soldier who kills several people on the battlefield may receive a medal. In either case, killing has occurred; yet the circumstances dramatically affect how society thinks about the killing.

The sociological explanations discussed so far do not address society's reaction to crime and criminals. Other sociological views take a more critical look at crime and society. They say the definition of crime is problematic and question whether bias in the criminal justice system means that some people and behaviors are more likely than others to be branded with a criminal label. They also say that much crime is rooted in the very way that our society is organized. Three general critical views exist: labeling theory, conflict approaches, and feminist perspectives. We look at each of these in turn.

**Labeling Theory.** As the killing example illustrates, whether a specific behavior is considered deviant may have more to do with the circumstances surrounding the behavior than with the behavior itself. This view lies at the heart of **labeling theory**, a perspective on crime that emerged in the 1960s. This perspective says that "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules or sanctions to an 'offender'" (Becker 1963:9).

But if deviance results from decisions to label a person and that person's behavior as deviant, it raises the possibility that this labeling process may be inaccurate. Such inaccuracy may occur either from honest mistakes or, worse, from bias based on someone's gender, race and ethnicity, social class, age, appearance, and other factors. Thus, not only is the definition of crime and deviance problematic, but so is the process by which certain individuals come to be labeled criminals.

William Chambliss's (1973) famous study of the "Saints" and the "Roughnecks" illustrates labeling theory's view on bias. The Saints were a group of middle-class delinquents who were able to skip their high school classes without getting into trouble. They would drive to a nearby town and commit vandalism and other offenses with no one being the wiser. Although some school officials and other townspeople suspected the Saints were up to no good, they considered the youths "good kids" from respectable, stable families and did not act on their suspicions. In contrast, the Roughnecks were a group of poor delinquents who often got into trouble for fighting and other offenses. School officials and police tended to watch them carefully and to sanction them when they misbehaved. Overall, the Saints were more delinquent than the Roughnecks, wrote Chambliss, but got into trouble far less often. They entered professional careers after high school and college, while the Roughnecks ended up in prison or with dead-end jobs.

Since labeling theory was developed in the 1960s, many studies have assessed the degree to which a suspect's gender, race and ethnicity, and social class affect the chances of that individual being officially labeled a criminal. The evidence is mixed: Some research finds considerable bias on all these dimensions, while other research finds only a small amount of bias that does not run rampant through the criminal justice system (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2007). Some scholars say flatly that much bias exists in legal processing, while others suggest that any bias is

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fairly minimal and that legal factors matter more than nonlegal ones such as race and gender. We return to this issue in Chapter 11 on sentencing, but for now we simply point out that the absence of consistent support for labeling theory's view on bias leads some critics to think of it as having little value. Labeling theory's supporters dispute this criticism and continue to insist that the theory has much to offer (Matsueda 2001).

Labeling theory makes one more provocative point: It says that people who are labeled deviant become *more* likely to commit deviance because they were so labeled. The idea here is that labeled individuals develop a deviant self-image and find themselves shunned or suspected by law-abiding individuals. Faced with these problems, they become bitter and discover that it is easier to hang out with other people who have also been labeled deviant. For all these reasons, they become more likely to commit deviance themselves *because* they were labeled. If this is true, labeling has the opposite effect from what is intended and from what deterrence theory would predict.

This argument of labeling theory is very appealing. Suppose you just got out of prison after spending five years there as punishment for armed robbery. Having paid your debt to society, you fill out application forms for several jobs, and each form asks you whether you have ever been convicted for any crimes. You dutifully write down "armed robbery" on all the forms. How likely is it that you will get a job? Now suppose you are in a bar or at a party trying to meet people. You start talking to someone who attracts you and who is evidently attracted by you. She or he asks you what you do for a living. You say you are looking for a job. You are then asked what you have been doing for the last few years. You respond that you just got out of prison for armed robbery. Would your companion respond enthusiastically, or would she or he make an excuse to go to the restroom? As this scenario suggests, once people are labeled criminals, they find it difficult to be reintegrated into society. Sometimes they are even suspected of crimes they did not commit. Perhaps labeling theory, then, is correct when it says that labeling produces more deviance, not less.

Research on this issue is again inconsistent. Some studies find that arrest and other labeling reduces future deviance, whereas other studies find that the opposite effect occurs (Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera 2006; Wilson, Gottfredson, and Stickle 2009). Also, self-images often do not become more negative because of arrest. We return to this issue in Chapter 12 on prisons and punishment, but for now we simply note that critics again find fault with labeling theory. Still, its emphasis on the negative effects of labeling has led to efforts to keep juvenile and other offenders out of prison through what is called "alternative" or "community" corrections. We explore these alternatives in Chapter 14.

**Conflict Views.** The "conflict tradition" in sociology began with the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) in the nineteenth century. Marx and Engels thought that capitalist society was divided into two major social classes: the *bourgeoisie,* who owned the means of production such as factories and tools, and the *proletariat,* who worked for the bourgeoisie. Reflecting their class interests, the bourgeoisie aim to maintain their elite position by oppressing and exploiting the poor, while members of the proletariat aim to change society to make it more equal. This simple summary of Marx's and Engels' views does not do it justice, but it does indicate that these philosophers saw society as being filled with class conflict. More to the point for our discussion, Marx and Engels thought that law played a key role in this conflict and wrote that the ruling class uses the law to maintain its power (Lynch and Michalowski 2006).

Various social scientists have developed Marx's and Engels' ideas further since they were introduced. Some call themselves Marxists and others call themselves conflict or critical theorists, but all basically make at least one of two points. First, the structure of American society leads to crime by the poor; second, the law reflects the interests of the ruling class and is used by the ruling class to reinforce its position at the top of society (Lynch and Michalowski 2006).

In support of the first argument, Dutch criminologist Willem Bonger (1876–1940) wrote long ago that capitalism produces crime by the poor because, as an economic system, it emphasizes competition, individualism, greed, and selfish behavior (Bonger 1916). In such a system, people will be more likely to perform actions that help themselves even if they hurt others. Although all social classes will commit various kinds of crime, the poor have an additional

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motivation—namely, economic need. For this reason, Bonger hypothesized that capitalism was a major cause of crime and predicted that crime would decline if capitalist nations became more socialistic.

Other scholars have focused on whether and how the law is used as a means to keep the poor in their place. Most research in this vein focuses on the extent to which social class and race/ethnicity affect criminal justice outcomes. We have already commented on this line of research in our discussion of labeling theory and reiterate here that its results are mixed. Some researchers suggest that the strongest support for conflict theory is found in the way the legal system treats white-collar crime by corporations and wealthy individuals. Laws against such crime are weak, they say, and punishment is often minimal (Reiman and Leighton 2010). These scholars conclude that, even if the law treats people who commit street crime fairly equally, it treats those accused of white-collar crime more leniently, even though white-collar crime can be very harmful. We will revisit conflict theory's assumptions in Chapter 11 on sentencing.

**Feminist Views.** Feminist work on crime and justice deals with several issues (Belknap 2007; Van Wormer and Bartollas 2011), including why girls and women commit crime. Most of the sociological explanations already discussed were developed with males in mind or tested only with data on males. Their neglect of girls and women leaves their relevance to female crime unclear. Researchers on this issue have generally found that the same factors that affect male criminality, including poverty and family problems, also affect female criminality. One interesting question is why, even when these problems do exist, males are still more likely than females to commit serious crime. Researchers explain this difference by pointing to the gender differences in socialization and opportunities to commit crime. Some say that male socialization patterns greatly help to produce male criminality and call for major changes in the ways boys are socialized (Collier 2004).

A central concern of feminist work on women's criminality has been the ways in which the victimization of girls and women leads them to commit crime and to suffer other problems. Girls

Feminist research on women's criminality has found that the sexual abuse that many girls experience may lead them to later engage in prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse, and other offenses.

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are much more likely than boys to be victims of sexual abuse. Such abuse has been implicated in various negative behaviors that girls and women later exhibit, including prostitution and drug and alcohol abuse (Chesney-Lind 2004).

Other feminist-inspired work focuses on how females fare compared to males in the legal system. Are police more or less likely to arrest females than males? Once they are arrested, are females more or less likely to receive long prison terms? The evidence on these issues is again inconsistent and depends to some extent on whether adolescents or adults are considered. Some studies suggest that girls are more likely than boys to get into trouble for various delinquent offenses such as skipping school and sexual promiscuity, but a few studies have failed to find such an effect. Most studies indicate that adult women suspected of serious crimes are treated somewhat more leniently than their male counterparts, but they also find that this gender effect is only moderate (Griffin and Wooldredge 2006; Steffensmeier and Demuth 2006). Gender does seems to have some effect on legal processing, but overall the effect seems rather small.

A final line of feminist work has focused on the victimization of women. Before feminists began studying crime in the 1970s, rape, domestic violence, and other crimes in which girls and women are especially likely to be victims received little attention. In the 1970s, rape became a central concern of the women's movement as researchers emphasized that rape and sexual assault were widespread and stemmed from various cultural views and from gender inequality rather than from provocative behavior by women themselves (Griffin 1971). The movement soon turned its attention to domestic violence, again emphasizing the high incidence of such violence and its roots in cultural views and in gender inequality. Researchers also documented how victims of rape and domestic assault were treated in the legal system where, it was said, a "second victimization" occurred as legal professionals doubted their word and often put them "on trial" (Spencer 1987).

Studies of rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence have burgeoned since the 1970s. Researchers have found, for example, that as many as one-third of U.S. women have been sexually or physically abused at some point in their lives (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). This body of research has led to major reforms in the criminal justice system. Victim advocate offices now exist in many communities, and various criminal justice procedures have been changed. For example, rape shield laws preventing rape victims from being asked in court about certain aspects of their sexual history now exist throughout the country (Flowe, Ebbesen, and Putcha-Bhagavatula 2007).

## Theory and Policy: Reducing Crime

We noted earlier that sound explanations of crime are necessary for the development of social and criminal justice policies to reduce the crime problem. The explanations discussed in this chapter have important implications for such policies.

The implications of biological explanations depend on which explanation we have in mind. In this regard, research on pregnancy and birth complications probably holds the most promise, as it indicates that improvements in prenatal nutrition and other prenatal problems should help reduce crime rates, at least to some degree. By comparison, other biological explanations might hold less promise, in part because their policy implications pose ethical and practical difficulties. For example, suppose scientists someday find specific genes that make people more likely to commit crime. How could this knowledge be used to reduce crime? Would genetic engineering be in order? Would children be tested to determine which had the "bad" genes? Once they were so identified, what would the lives of these individuals be like? As these questions suggest, crime-reduction policies developed from genetic research will be fraught with ethical and practical dilemmas. The same problems affect hormonal research. Suppose high testosterone is eventually proven to increase the risk of criminality. A logical step would then be to identify males with high testosterone levels and to reduce these levels, perhaps by giving them a drug or even by castrating them. Again, any such policy would raise serious ethical and practical dilemmas even if we reduced the testosterone levels of only males who had already broken the law.

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## International Focus

### Myth and Reality of Crime in the British Countryside

During the last decade, rural crime has been the subject of alarm and much debate in Great Britain. The issue emerged with a vengeance in August 1999, when Fred Barras, a 16-year-old with 29 convictions for assault, burglary, forgery, and theft, broke into the farmhouse of Tony Martin, age 55, who kept an unregistered shotgun under his bed because his home had been burglarized many times before. Barras had driven to the farmhouse with two accomplices, both in their thirties, from his home in a housing development 70 miles away. All three burglars were unarmed. Martin confronted the intruders with his shotgun and shot at them as they fled. Barras was hit in the back, stumbled outside, and died. One of his accomplices was hit in the legs and seriously wounded but survived the shotgun attack. In April 2000, a jury deliberated for about nine hours and convicted Martin of murder in the death of Barras. The defendant was sentenced to life in prison.

Martin's conviction and sentence unleashed a torrent of criticism throughout Great Britain. In one public opinion poll after another, more than 90 percent of Britons denounced his conviction. Political leaders called for new laws to protect homeowners who use force to defend themselves or their homes. Some also urged that the country's strict gun-control laws be relaxed.

Martin's case also focused attention on rural crime in Great Britain. As already noted, Martin himself had been a crime victim several times. Burglars had broken into his remote home repeatedly and stolen many items, including china, a dresser, and a grandfather clock. Martin stopped reporting the burglaries, he said at his trial, because the police did not seem concerned about them. A neighbor of Martin noted, "I know nobody who has not been a victim of crime. Whether it's burglary, mugging, theft—it's absolutely rampant" (Lyall 2000:A1). Martin's case seemed to raise concern about rural crime. A month after he was convicted, a couple who had planned to buy a home not too far from his changed their minds at the last moment. The owner said they were afraid that the surrounding rural county, Norfolk, was rife with crime and that the police were too far away to help if a burglary occurred.

Authorities took several steps in response to the increased concern. Kent County allocated more than £1 million for extra police and patrol cars and hired several "crime wardens"—trained civilians wearing dark red jackets and black pants—to help patrol the county. A county official said, "In Kent, we are very aware that for many people there is a very real and everyday fear of crime. Kent residents have told us that they want to feel more secure and see more police on the beat. Our demands for extra bobbies were getting nowhere, so we decided to take action and do it ourselves" (Sapsted 2001:1).

If rural crime was, in fact, rising in Great Britain, scholars said, several explanations appeared to account for the increase. First, rural areas in the country had been losing farms and population. Because their homes were already far apart, making them easy targets for burglars, the decrease in farms and population made the dwellings that remained even more isolated than before. This factor, in turn, rendered them that much more tempting for burglars and other offenders.

Important policy implications of psychological theories arise from their emphasis on negative childhood experiences and developmental impairments. The children at greatest risk for such problems are typically those born to young, poor, unwed mothers. Significant efforts are now under way to help these children, including home-visitation programs in which nurses, social workers, and/or other trained professionals make regular visits to these children's homes right after birth and for many weeks thereafter. At these visits, they give the new mothers valuable practical advice and moral support. Other efforts include parent management training programs in which parents of children with behavioral problems are instructed on discipline and other parenting skills. While all these efforts are still fairly new, a growing body of evidence indicates they are very effective at reducing later developmental and behavioral problems among high-risk

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Second, many rural residents had turned from farming to other occupations away from their homes. As a consequence, their homes were more likely than before to be empty during the day, again making them more attractive targets for burglars.

A third reason involves a decrease in "citizen policing," which the Kent initiative was designed to address. Many rural Britons who were not farmers used to work in the shops in their small towns. There they "were able to walk about helping to police their own town" (Crime & Justice International 2001:11). Many village shops had closed, however, resulting in fewer people in town and thus less citizen policing. Another consequence of closing village shops was that towns reduced their regular policing because they had fewer stores to monitor. The reduced policing was thought to be yet another factor in the rise in rural crime.

Recall that Fred Barras drove 70 miles to Tony Martin's farmhouse to burglarize it. As this aspect of Martin's sad story might suggest, another possible reason for any increase in rural crime was the availability of better transportation to the British countryside. The roads from London and other major cities to Britain's rural areas were improved greatly during the 1990s. This fact made it easier for criminals to drive longer distances to break into homes. Although most offenders continue to commit their crimes near their own homes and communities, the improvement of British roads may have had the side effect of making crime in rural communities more likely.

The supposed rise in rural crime may also have resulted from crime-fighting efforts in British cities, many of which have installed closed-circuit TV cameras and other surveillance devices to try to reduce their own crime rates. If these efforts worked, they may have prompted offenders to commit their crimes in rural areas, which feature less surveillance.

These explanations obviously differ in many ways, but all illustrate that changes in crime rates occur from changes in the external environment and not from changes inside individuals. As such, they reinforce the importance of explaining the causes of crime with a sociological lens.

In reality, rural crime in Great Britain may not be as serious a problem as British officials and residents thought in the wake of Tony Martin's crime and conviction. Data from the British Crime Survey, which has a similar format to the National Crime Victimization Survey in the United States, indicate that both rural and urban crime actually declined in Great Britain from 1995 to 2006 before leveling off. These data also indicate that rural crime rates in the country are only about half as high as urban crime rates.

These trends and comparisons suggest that rural areas in Great Britain are still safer than urban areas, but certain aspects of rural crime in that nation still underscore its overall seriousness. Because rural areas are isolated geographically, rural residents tend to live far from police and many kinds of social services. When these residents do suffer a crime, police response time tends to be relatively slow. Drug and alcohol offenders in rural areas also live farther from rehabilitation and counseling services than do their urban counterparts. The geographical isolation of rural areas also means that women who are victimized by domestic violence lack shelters and other services that are more commonly found in urban areas; by the same token, rape response services are lacking for rural women in Great Britain who are raped or sexually assaulted. Rural residents whose motor vehicles are stolen are also disproportionately affected, as they lack the public transportation that urban residents whose vehicles are stolen can use until they obtain a replacement vehicle.

Sources: Crime & Justice International 2001; Lyall 2000; Marshall and Johnson 2005; Nicholas, Kernshaw, and Walker 2007; Sapsted 2001.

children (Greenwood 2006; Welsh and Farrington 2007). For adolescent offenders, a multifaceted approach involving family therapy, parent management training, and conflict resolution counseling and programming in school and peer settings has been found to be effective in curbing criminality (Wasserman, Miller, and Cothern 2000).

Sociological explanations also have important implications for crime-reduction efforts, although the specific measures they suggest again depend on which explanation we have in mind. For example, ecological explanations suggest the need to focus on certain physical and social characteristics of communities. While we cannot wave a magic wand and fix everything overnight, measures that successfully reduce residential density, promote greater involvement in neighborhood voluntary associations, and address other criminogenic community characteristics should help reduce crime.

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Explanations emphasizing blocked economic opportunities also suggest the need to reduce poverty. If poverty leads to feelings of angry aggression, relative deprivation, and other social psychological states that promote street crime, then efforts to reduce poverty should help greatly to reduce crime. Along these lines, the improved economy in the 1990s is thought to have helped reduce the crime rate in that decade (Blumstein and Wallman 2006).

Hirschi's social bonding theory has several policy implications. It directs our attention to the family and school as critical sources of attitudes that either promote criminality or inhibit it. It suggests the need to help parents—especially those who are young, poor, and unwed—to improve their parenting skills. It also suggests the need to improve our schools by having smaller classrooms and better school buildings, as these measures could help improve students' attitudes toward their schools. While little public policy has focused on school improvement, early childhood intervention programs show significant potential for crime reduction.

Finally, critical approaches to crime have policy implications. Although support for labeling theory has been inconsistent, this concept does suggest that we exercise caution in regard to arresting and imprisoning at least some types of offenders lest they become worse as a result of their labeling. It also suggests the need for careful attention to whether the labeling process itself is fair or biased. Conflict theory suggests a similar need, and likewise highlights the possible criminogenic effects of values such as competition, individualism, and selfishness. Meanwhile, feminist research directs our attention to the need to take all possible steps to reduce the victimization of women by rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, and it reminds us of the need to change male socialization patterns so as to reduce male crime rates.

The policy implications of all the explanations discussed in this chapter suggest the need for a multifaceted approach in reducing crime (Currie 1998; Greenwood 2006; Welsh and Farrington 2007). Although the criminal justice system remains important in keeping us safe from the offenders we already have, efforts that *prevent* crime from arising in the first place are critical if we are to have the safest society possible. Although all of the theories discussed in this chapter have different implications for how best to prevent crime, they hold more promise overall for crime reduction than a mere reliance on the criminal justice system.

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# Summary

1. Accurate crime data are essential for several reasons. They allow us to determine crime rate trends, to know which kinds of places have higher and lower crime rates, and which kinds of people have higher and lower rates. Much crime never comes to the attention of police, however, and this "dark figure of crime" makes it difficult to develop accurate crime data.
2. The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is the federal government's source of "official" crime data. It relies on reports of crime that police hear about from citizen victims and witnesses. Because the majority of victims do not tell the police about their crimes, the UCR undercounts the actual number of crimes. The production of crime rates in the UCR also may reflect the behavior of police. During the 1990s, the police in several cities downgraded crime reports from citizens in attempts to artificially lower the crime rates in their cities.
3. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is the federal government's source of information on crime victims and their victimization. It probably provides a more accurate estimate than the UCR of U.S. crime and crime trends. At the same time, victims may sometimes forget or refuse to tell NCVS interviewers about the crimes they have experienced. As a consequence, the NCVS itself may underestimate the actual amount of crime.
4. Self-report surveys further help to uncover the dark figure of crime and have determined that people commit many more offenses than are found in the UCR. Although respondents to these surveys may fail to tell the truth about offenses they have committed, the best conclusion is that their reports are reliable. Early self-report surveys included only minor offenses, but more recent surveys have included items measuring more serious offenses.
5. Field or ethnographic research is yet another source of information on crime and offenders. Its major advantage is that it provides a rich portrait of offenders, their motivation for committing crime, and the ways in which they go about committing crime. A major disadvantage is that field research is not necessarily generalizable beyond the subjects studied.
6. To reduce crime, it is important to understand why crime occurs. Today's biological research on crime involves such factors as heredity, hormones, and pregnancy and birth complications. Some evidence supports a strong criminogenic role for all these factors, but other evidence suggests only a weak role or none at all. From a policy standpoint, explanations involving pregnancy and birth problems most readily lend themselves to practical approaches to reducing crime.
7. Psychological explanations of crime involve psychoanalytic approaches and personality factors. Although evidence for both explanations is inconsistent, these theories nonetheless direct our attention to early childhood as a critical period for child development. Negative experiences during childhood may help promote later criminality.
8. Several sociological explanations of crime exist. Ecological approaches focus on the social and physical characteristics of communities that either raise or lower neighborhood crime rates. Blocked opportunity explanations emphasize the negative social psychological states induced by poverty in a society that values economic success. Learning theories emphasize the role played by negative peer influences. Social control explanations emphasize the various factors that keep individuals from deciding that crime is acceptable behavior. Critical approaches suggest that crime may result from inequality in society, from how offenders are treated by the criminal justice system, and from male socialization; they alert us to possible biases in the application of the criminal label. Taken together, sociological explanations reinforce the need for a social policy that focuses on the causes of crime and not just on the apprehension and imprisonment of the criminal offenders we already have identified.

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## Key Terms

anomie theory
crime rate
crimes known to the police
deterrence theory
differential association theory
differential opportunity theory
field research
free will
incidence
labeling theory
National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)
prevalence
rational choice theory
routine activities theory
self-control theory
self-report surveys
social bonding theory
social ecology
Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)

## Questions for Exploration

1. The FBI's annual *Crime in the United States* publication contains data from the Uniform Crime Reports and can be accessed through the FBI's website at http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm#cius. Once there, you will see a link for the last several years of the UCR under a section called "Crime in the United States." Click the most recent year shown for which data are not considered "preliminary," and then click the link for "Violent Crime" at the left side of the page. Read through the page that appears and determine the trend for violent crime during the past few years. Describe this trend.
2. Click the "Murder" link near the top of the page and then scroll down until you find the number of people who were murdered in the year discussed by the webpage. What was this number? How many murders occurred for every 100,000 residents?
3. Discuss the value of the NCVS's distinction between sexual assault and rape. Do you think it is appropriate for the NCVS to include both sexual assault and rape in its measurement, or should it follow the Uniform Crime Reports in including only rape?
4. Develop a self-report survey that focuses on interviewing people about Part II crimes they may have experienced. Remember to use language that does not affect respondents' answers. Try your survey out on five people. What did you discover about the survey writing and the interviewing process?
5. This chapter makes special note of the fact that victims of serious crimes report fewer than half of the crimes they experience to the police for several reasons, such as fear of reprisal. Discuss strategies that might encourage citizens in your community (hometown or college) to report their victimizations.
6. Suppose a woman shoots her husband and then at her trial claims diminished capacity because she was suffering from premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Break into small groups to discuss the legitimacy of the PMS syndrome as a legal defense.
7. Which social services or social programs, if any, does your community (hometown or college) have in place in various neighborhoods or on campus to help prevent crime? How effective are these services or programs?

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# It's Your Call

1. Suppose you are the police chief of a medium-sized city in a large state where the crime rate has been growing rapidly for the last two years. Police chiefs across the state are being criticized for allowing the crime rate to rise. You think this criticism is unfair, but you also know that your job may be on the line. One of your aides suggests that the police precincts in high-crime neighborhoods of the city be instructed to demand more "hard evidence" that the aggravated assaults and forcible rapes that come to their attention do, indeed, fit the definitions of those crimes. Because it is often difficult to determine exactly which type of crime occurred, your aide reasons, it would be appropriate to take this stricter approach to classifying crimes. Doing so, your aide speculates, would cause about half of all these aggravated assaults and forcible rapes to be downgraded to simple assaults. If so, your city's crime rate would show at least a slight decrease, and your performance as its police chief would be widely applauded. Do you adopt your aide's suggestion? Why or why not?

2. This chapter notes the higher "street crime" rates among African Americans and offers a structural explanation for racial differences in street crime. Suppose you are a police officer in a large Northern city where approximately 60 percent of the population is black, 30 percent is white, and the remaining 10 percent are people of other races. You understand the racial differences in crime rates, but you also realize that the vast majority of African Americans do not commit crime. An armed robbery occurs in a mixed-race neighborhood of your city. Your partner, a white male officer with two years on the job, utters a racial slur and then says, "What do you expect from those people?" Do you say anything in response? If no, why not? If yes, what do you say?

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