Unit III: Criminological Theories Related to Juvenile Delinquency
Introduction

• As we move into Unit III of your Juvenile Delinquency course, we will start to examine and analyze the underlying reasons of why juveniles commit delinquent acts and/or status offenses.
Criminological Theories

• *Criminology* is the study of theories that attempt to provide an understanding of criminal behavior and/or crime.

• In this unit, we will take a closer look at criminological theories related to juvenile delinquency, and in particular, juvenile gangs in America.

• Let’s begin by examining the following question: In your opinion, why do juveniles commit delinquent acts and/or status offenses?

• If you forgot what status offense means, make sure you revisit Unit I and Unit II of this course to refresh your memory.
Little John: A Juvenile’s Story

Let’s begin this unit with learning more about Little John.

• Watch the video about interactions between Officer McDonald and Little John, a juvenile.
  https://online.columbiasouthern.edu/csucoursecontent/courses/emergency_services/bcj/bcj2201/15K/video/unitiii_video.mp4

• Click here to access the transcript for this video.
Criminological Theories

• Throughout the years, the truth has been sought by requesting guidance from kings, priests, and philosophers.

• Today, however, we utilize science, which offers more accurate answers.

• The two basic tools of science are theory and research.

• Research involves collecting data that helps identify important variables as well as any related variables. This, in turn, leads to new directions.
Criminological Theories (Cont.)

• A theory attempts to explain the events in the world (Bartollas & Miller, 2011). It seeks to provide an explanation for the who, what, when, where, why, and how events occur.

• Although theories try to explain events, they are not final. For example, one theory may explain one behavior but not another. Additionally, a theory may not explain a behavior for all individuals.
Criminological Theories (Cont.)

- The following prominent criminological theories take center stage when examining the complex issue of juvenile delinquency:
  - rational choice theory,
  - social learning theory, and
  - strain theory.
- It is not to say that these are the only theories that exist in the study of criminology; however, these three particular theories are commonly utilized to help us understand juvenile delinquency in the United States.
- The more we can understand the reasoning for delinquency in the United States, the better we can help provide deterrent and preventive methods to curb delinquent acts.
Rational Choice Theory

• *Rational choice theory* presents the idea that individuals make a rational choice to commit or not to commit a criminal act.

• Hence, the crime may be prevented if the offender knew there would be consequences or legal sanctions (Akers, Potter, & Hill, 2012).

• The main assumption and underpinnings of rational choice theory are that individuals have free will in the choices they make in life, and this includes delinquent behavior as well as status offenses committed by juveniles.

• Do juveniles make a rational choice before they commit a crime?
Rational Choice Theory (Cont.)

• Rational choice theory as it relates to juvenile delinquency explores the idea that juveniles make a conscious decision based upon the question of whether the punishment outweighs the rewards.

• The concept and rational thought process of right versus wrong is presented at a very early age, and this rational choice thought process continues throughout life.

• If you think about a child, at what age does the child know the difference between right and wrong?
Social Learning Theory

• We must understand that not every theory will fit every juvenile’s situation and/or reasoning to commit a delinquent act or status offense.

• Because there is no one set blueprint, we need to examine more theories and causations of juvenile delinquency such as social learning theory.

• *Social learning theory* presents the idea that all behavior is learned—both good and bad.

• Hence, our social surroundings often dictate how we perceive the world.
Social Learning Theory (Cont.)

• Edwin Sutherland first introduced social learning theory in his 1939 book *Principles of Criminology*.

• In this original formulation, Sutherland noted that criminal behavior is learned in the context of intimate personal groups (family and friends).


  When abuse and hostility define a child’s relationships with parents and peers, those same qualities carry forward into the child’s relationship with others outside the home and it is thus assumed that violence is a learned behavior that children repeat in their adult relationships. (p. 1005)
Social Learning Theory

• How influenced are you by your family and friends?
• Social learning theory as it relates to juvenile delinquency argues that juveniles commit crime and learn how to commit crime because of their social surroundings and groups.
• The most important group is the primary family, which would include the parents and siblings.
How often have you heard the term *cycle of violence* within your criminal justice studies?

If you are new to the term cycle of violence, the concept and idea argues that violent behavior is passed down from generation to generation because of the social learning involved within the immediate family dynamics.
Cycle of Violence

• Click the link to watch the video at right.
• Think about the following questions:
  • If parents live a life of violence, will the children be more likely to learn this behavior and create a pathway to committing criminal behavior?
  • Will violent and/or criminal behavior be considered the norm?

  Juvenile Status Offenders and Their Families/Educational Documentary Video

  (Rosaryfilms, 2009)

  • Click here to access the transcript for this video.

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Cycle of Violence

• In a 2001 National Institute of Justice article titled “An Update on the Cycle of Violence,” authors and researchers Cathy Widom and Michael Maxfield (2001) presented research that examined in detail the cycle of violence phenomena as they relate to parenting and juvenile delinquency in the United States.

• It is also widely suggested that violence begets violence—that today’s abused children become tomorrow’s violent offenders (Widom & Maxfield, 2001).
Cycle of Violence

• Further, one of the key findings presented states that “being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59%, as an adult by 28%, and for a violent crime by 30%” (Widom & Maxfied, 2001, p. 2).

• It is important to note that Widom and Maxfield (2001) also provide important deterrent and prevention methods that could help decrease juvenile delinquency as well as truancy issues.
Criminological Theories

Three crucial cycle-of-violence prevention methods include the following needs (Widom & Maxfield, 2001):

- For police officers, schools, and home healthcare workers to intervene early when possible signs of delinquency and status offenses are evident;
- For the juvenile court system to recognize the high risks of neglect as well as child physical abuse;
- And to reexamine whether out-of-home placement policies and programs are actually working to deter future delinquent behavior.
Let’s now learn about some important theories in juvenile delinquency:

- Social Bond
- Social Learning
- Strain
- Anomie
- Self-Control
- Life Course
- Routine Activity
- Offender Search
- Situational Crime Prevention
- Broken Windows
- Differential Association
- Social Disorganization
Social Bond

• The social bond theory is part of the control theory that asks “Why don’t people commit crime?” rather than “Why do people commit crime?”

• This theory, first introduced by Travis Hirschi, argues that when a social bond is broken, criminal behavior may result.

• Typically, when discussing this theory, the bond is one from the individual to the society.
Social Bond

Social bond theory has four main components:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>This includes any shared beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>This is the amount of time spent on the activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>This is the energy put into the activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>This is the value and moral system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Social Learning

• The youth may have grown up in a family lifestyle surrounded by gang activity. However, as mentioned earlier, social learning can also be positive in nature.

• One of the main incentives for disengaging from a gang lifestyle is because family and friends may have pulled back from gang membership also.
Strain

• Another item to consider in your understanding of juvenile delinquency is strain theory.

• General strain theory, presented by Robert Merton, argues that all individuals in the United States are encouraged to pursue the conventional goals of money and middle class status via legitimate (noncriminal) means (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

• When individuals are unable to meet the conventional goals, they experience strain or pressure.
The inability to meet these goals may be due to the following factors:

- parents who are unable to provide necessary guidance, housing, etc.;
- children attending inadequate schools or living in impoverished neighborhoods;
- individuals experiencing discrimination; and
- individuals unable to afford college (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

Unfortunately, not all individuals will be able to obtain these through non-criminal means; hence, these individuals may turn to crime to meet these goals (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).
Strain

• These crimes could include theft, selling drugs, and prostitution.

• Additionally, individuals may substitute different goals, that they feel that they can achieve, instead of the conventional ones determined by society (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

• Hence, the method of obtaining the goals, as well as the goals themselves, may be criminal.
Strain

• It is important to note that not all individuals who experience strain (inability to achieve conventional goals) turn to crime.

• Research has indicated that those who experience strain and turn to crime are more likely to join a delinquent subculture where the criminal values are accepted and encouraged (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).
Strain

• The strain model:

Society says you must have $$$ and middle class status. + The individual cannot obtain these through legitimate means. = Instead, the individual resorts to crime.
Anomie

• Similar to strain theory, the theory of anomie, which was first introduced by Robert Merton in 1938, explains that crime occurs due to the strong emphasis on monetary success, also called the American Dream (Cullen & Agnew, 2011).

• Unfortunately, although the United States places an importance on money, the emphasis on legitimate forms to obtain this is very weak.

• Hence, individuals may use unconventional means, such as crime, to pursue money.
Anomie

• The anomie model (Cullen & Agnew, 2011):

1. Society's goal = $$

2. Individual cannot obtain $$ through legitimate means

3. Crime
Self-Control

• The *self-control theory*, in its simplest form, states that the lower an individual’s self-control, the higher the possibility that the individual will engage in crime or act analogous to crime.

• This is different from Hirschi’s earlier social control theory in that this theory is focused more on the individual than on external sources of control.

• According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), self-control is established during childhood, from ages 8-10, and is stable throughout the life course.
Self-Control (Cont.)

• If the parents fail to monitor the child's behavior, recognize deviant behavior when it occurs, and punish such behavior, a child may not learn self-control.

• This could result in a child that is impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal.

• Furthermore, this pattern repeats throughout life with the individual surrendering to temporary temptations, crime, and other forms of deviance.
Self-Control (Cont.)

• Although parents may try to monitor behavior and recognize and punish deviancy, low self-control may still occur. This could be due to any of the following aspects:
  • uncaring parents,
  • caring parents without the time and the energy to monitor behavior,
  • caring parents who monitor the behavior but may not see anything wrong, and
  • caring parents who monitor the behavior but may not have the inclination nor the means to punish the child.
Self-Control (Cont.)

• Self-control theory differentiates between two terms:
  • *criminality*, which is defined as the propensity to offend, and
  • *crime*, which is defined as breaking the law (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

• Propensity cannot be acted upon unless opportunity exists. Hence, crime is viewed as the product resulting from the meeting of low self-control and opportunity.

• Since opportunities are readily available, the individual will become deeply involved in criminal behavior.
Self-Control (Cont.)

• Although highly probable, crime is not an automatic or necessary result of low self-control, but low self-control may instead result in comparable acts (drinking and gambling).

• Hence, the absence of self-control does not automatically result in one type of crime.

• Instead, an offender may not show a strong preference for a specific crime or pattern of crime.
Self-Control (Cont.)

- Common elements of crime include the following components:
  - immediate gratification;
  - exciting, risky, or thrilling;
  - few or meager long-term benefits;
  - little skill or planning; and
  - pain and discomfort for the victim.

- These elements are all linked as individuals with low self-control tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal.
Life Course

• The premise of *life course criminology* is that an individual’s likelihood of offending changes across time.

• This change could be attributed to any of the following factors:
  • a turning point (new relationship),
  • increased social control,
  • a change in routine activities, and
  • a commitment to a new life.

• However, this change is not inevitable and is often due to an individual’s choices.
A change in criminal behavior across time has not always been accepted as an explanation as criminologists, until recently, had little interest in how individuals develop over time. Instead, the focus has been on what happens when individuals are placed in a particular social role. A change was provided with three major contributions:

- how delinquents and non-delinquents differ from one another,
- linking early antisocial conduct to later criminal behavior, and
- how antisocial youths were shaped by their circumstances and the impact of their social world.
Life Course (Cont.)

• Other researchers noted that although crime may begin during adolescence, forerunners to crime (bullying and lying) occur during childhood.

• This research offers the following suggestions:
  • the causes of crime probably occur in childhood,
  • theories focusing solely on teenage activities are incomplete, and
  • the link between childhood and later deviance is a dynamic and developmental process.
Life Course (Cont.)

• Life course criminology has become popular in recent years through its unquestionable perspective that crime is dynamic and occurs throughout the life course.

• Hence, current criminologists must attempt to explain the continuity and/or change in criminal involvement.
Routine Activity

• This theory proposes that three elements are necessary for a predatory crime to occur:
  • a motivated offender,
  • a suitable target, and
  • a lack of a capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

• This originated in the study of post-WWII changes to society, whereby individuals altered routine activities or everyday activities, to include time away from home and purchasing durable goods.
Routine Activity

• These changes in routine activities led to the convergence of the elements (a motivated offender, lack of guardianship, and a suitable target), thereby increasing crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979).
Offender Search

• This theory is based on the belief that most offenders have routine activities (school, work, leisure) similar to non-offenders.

• With these activities, they develop maps of the area leading to an awareness that may identify potential criminal targets.

• Since crime is highly patterned by daily behavior, offenders will most likely limit their search for targets near their travel routines, termed awareness space by Brantingham and Brantingham (1993).
Situational Crime Prevention

• This theory proposes that the nature of criminal opportunities influences the amount, nature, and location of crime.

• Instead of focusing on the criminal personalities, a focus should be on the situation in which crime occurs (Clarke, 1980).

• With this, prevention strategies should be implemented to reduce the opportunity, decrease criminal payoff, and increase detection of offenders.
Broken Windows

• This theory, by far one of the most widely known, proposes that unchecked social disorder or public incivility causes serious crime (Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

• It begins with a “broken window,” which is a metaphor for when disorderly individuals are allowed to take over public spaces.

• These disorderly individuals may not be violent or criminals but may just be drunks and addicts.
Broken Windows

• In response to the social disorder, individuals become fearful and change their behavior, including moving out of the neighborhood or withdrawing from public places.

• This leads to a breakdown of community controls, sending the message that no one cares, thereby allowing the disorder to worsen.
Differential Association

• *Differential association*, as advanced by Edwin Sutherland in 1939, explored the significance of social learning in the commission of a crime (Schmalleger, 2012).

• This theory emphasized that social learning plays a major role in crime as all behavior is learned, including crime.

• Hence, crime is similar to other behavior in that it, too, is learned.
At the core of differential association is the fact that the individual has a favorable view towards violations of the law.

Basically, a person associates with those who have a different opinion about which law violations are favorable rather than unfavorable.
Differential Association

• Sutherland identified the following principles:
  ❖ Criminal behavior is learned through interacting with others.
  ❖ This learning is a process of communication.
  ❖ The main part of learning criminal behavior happens in a small, personal group.
  ❖ When crime is learned, it includes how to commit the crime (this may be simple or complex) and motives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
  ❖ Differential associations could vary in duration, frequency, intensity, and priority.
  ❖ Learning criminal behavior involves processes used to learn other behaviors (Schmalleger, 2012).
Social Disorganization

• First introduced by Shaw and McKay in 1942 in their research of juvenile delinquency in Chicago neighborhoods, social disorganization theory focuses on the place rather than the people to explain conditions that are favorable to crime.

• It is simply defined as a community’s inability to realize common goals and solve problems.

• There are three main components in social disorganization:
  ➢ racial and ethnic heterogeneity,
  ➢ low socioeconomic status, and
  ➢ mobility (individuals moving into and out of the neighborhood).
Social Disorganization (Cont.)

• These factors decrease a neighborhood’s ability to control residents’ behavior, leading to less social control and more crime.

• One very important aspect of social disorganization includes the code of the street.

• Due to deindustrialization, housing segregation, and white flight, inner-city communities developed as isolated and predominantly African American.

• The isolation of these communities has allowed the code of the street to succeed, resulting in an unconventional culture, dominance of achieving respect, and promotion of violence.
Conclusion

When you have finished your readings for this unit, make sure to reflect on what you have learned, and think of some examples that would provide insight into your understanding on how different theories can help provide an understanding of the reasoning for juvenile delinquency in the United States.
References


References


