



THE ESSENTIALS

FOURTH EDITION

# CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY

STEPHEN G. TIBBETTS / ALEX R. PIQUERO



# **Criminological Theory**

**Fourth Edition**

*Stephen G. Tibbetts dedicates this book to his daughter, Rian Sage, who has been really cool to hang out with watching SpongeBob over the past decade; Rian has been the best daughter anyone could ask for.*

*Alex R. Piquero dedicates this book to the memory of Stephen G. Tibbetts. I had the honor of being Steve's office mate during graduate school at the University of Maryland, his coauthor, and most importantly his friend until he suddenly passed away in 2019. There is not a day that goes by that I do not think of him.*

# **Criminological Theory**

## **The Essentials**

**Fourth Edition**

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# PREFACE

This textbook is intended to cover the essential topics of criminological theory in a briefer and more efficient manner than other larger, more comprehensive texts on this topic. The fourth edition of *Criminological Theories: The Essentials* presents a comprehensive overview of the major concepts and perspectives of virtually all major theories in the evolution of criminological theory, reviewing some of the most recent empirical research on each theory that is currently available. Furthermore, in each chapter, as well as in an entire concluding chapter, this book examines the various policy implications that can be derived from each type of criminological theory in addition to what can possibly be done but has not yet been tested.

A number of excellent criminology theory textbooks are available to students and professors, so why this one? This book can serve as the primary text for an introductory undergraduate course in criminological theory or as the primary text for a graduate course, given the depth and comprehensive nature of the discussion of virtually all theories in the historic and modern criminological literature. It is important to note that the book provides a comprehensive, yet concise, survey of the current state of existing scientific literature in virtually all areas of criminological theory and gives a history of how we got to this point regarding each theoretical model and topic area. A key feature of this text is a section in each chapter that examines various policy implications that have resulted from most of the dominant theories in the discipline in addition to results from empirical evaluation studies of programs based on theories presented in each chapter.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

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This book uses a rather typical outline for criminological theory textbook topics or chapters, beginning with an introduction of the definitions of *crime* and *criminology* and measuring crime as well as what such measures of crime reveal regarding the various characteristics that are most associated with higher offending rates. This is an important aspect of the book, because each theory or model must be judged by how well it explains the distribution of crime rates among these various characteristics. In the introduction, the criteria required for determining causality are also discussed, including an examination of how extremely difficult (often impossible) this is to do in criminological research because we can't randomly assign individuals to bad parenting, unemployment, low IQ, and so on.

This book presents 12 chapters that chronologically trace the history and development of criminological theory with an emphasis on when such perspectives became popular among theorists and mainstream society. Thus, we start with the earliest models (preclassical and classical school) of criminal theorizing in the 18th century.

Then, we examine the evolution of the positive school perspective of the 19th century, which began with biological theories of crime. Next, the book presents the various other positive theories proposed in the early 20th century, which include social structure models and social process theories presented in the early or mid-1900s. Then, we explore theoretical models presented in the latter 20th century, such as social conflict and Marxist and feminist models of criminality. Chapters 10, 11, and 12 then present the more contemporary theoretical explanations of criminality, which include developmental and life-course models, integrated theories of crime, and a separate chapter regarding feminist perspectives of crime, which we are proud to present. This book is divided into 12 chapters that mirror the chapters in a typical criminology textbook, each dealing with a particular type or category of theories in criminology. Each of the chapters concludes with an evaluation of the empirical support for the theories and policy implications derivable. These chapters are as follows:

### **Chapter 1. Introduction: An Overview of Issues in Criminological Theory**

We first provide an introductory chapter that deals with what criminological theory is as well as examines the concepts of crime and the criteria used to determine whether a theory is adequate for explaining behavior. This chapter introduces the facts and criteria by which all theoretical models presented in the following chapters are evaluated. We also include a discussion of the criteria involved in determining whether a given factor or variable actually causes criminal behavior.

### **Chapter 2. Preclassical and Classical Theories of Crime**

In this chapter, we examine the types of theories that were dominant before logical theories of crime were presented, namely supernatural or demonic theories of crime. Then we examine how the Age of Enlightenment led to more rational approaches to explaining criminal behavior, such as that of the classical school and neoclassical theory. We also discuss at length the major model that evolved from the classical school: deterrence theory. We describe studies that have empirically tested deterrence theory.

### **Chapter 3. Modern Applications of the Classical Perspective: Deterrence, Rational Choice, and Routine Activities / Lifestyle Theories of Crime**

In this chapter, we review more contemporary theoretical models and empirical findings regarding explanations of crime that focus on deterrence and other recent perspectives—such as rational choice theory, routine activities theory, and the lifestyle perspective—that are based on the assumption that individuals rationally choose their behavior or targets. Some of these perspectives focus more on the perceived costs or benefits of a given act to the individual who carries it out, whereas other models focus on the types of locations that people choose to commit crime or the daily activities or lifestyles that predispose them to certain criminal behavior.

## **Chapter 4. Early Positive School Perspectives of Criminality**

This chapter examines the early development of theoretical models proposing that certain individuals or groups are predisposed to criminal offending. The earliest theories in the 19th century proposed that certain physical traits are associated with criminal behavior, whereas perspectives in the early 20th century proposed that such criminality is due to level of intelligence. This chapter also examines body type theory, which proposes that the physical body type of an individual affects criminality. We also examine modern applications of this perspective and review the empirical support such theoretical models have received in modern times.

## **Chapter 5. Modern Biosocial Perspectives of Criminal Behavior**

In this chapter, we review the various forms of modern studies that investigate the link between physiology and criminality, including family studies, twin and adoption studies, cytogenetic studies, and studies on hormones and neurotransmitters. We examine some of the primary methods used to explore this link as well as discuss the findings of more rational and recent empirical studies, which show a relatively consistent link between physiological factors and criminal behavior.

## **Chapter 6. Early Social Structure and Strain Theories of Crime**

This chapter reviews the development of the social structure perspective, which originated in the 19th century and culminated with Merton's theory of strain in the early 20th century. A variety of perspectives based on Merton's strain theory are examined, but all of these models have a primary emphasis on how the social structure produces criminal behavior. We examine the many empirical studies that have tested the validity of these early social structure theories as well as discuss policy implications that these models suggested.

## **Chapter 7. The Chicago School and Cultural and Subcultural Theories of Crime**

In this chapter, we examine the evolution and propositions of the scholars at the University of Chicago, the most advanced form of criminological theorizing of the early 20th century. In addition to discussing the evolution of the Chicago school and its application of ecological theory to criminal behavior, we examine the more modern applications of this theoretical framework for explaining criminal behavior among residents of certain neighborhoods. Finally, we discuss several theoretical models that examine cultural or subcultural groups that differ drastically from conventional norms.

## **Chapter 8. Social Process and Learning Theories of Crime**

This chapter examines the many perspectives proposing that criminal behavior is the result of being taught by significant others to commit crime. When these theories were first presented, they were considered novel. We examine the evolution of various



theories of social learning, starting with the earliest, which were based on somewhat outdated forms of learning theory, and then progress to more modern theories that incorporate contemporary learning models. We also examine the most recent versions of this theoretical perspective, which incorporate all forms of social learning in explaining criminal behavior.

## **Chapter 9. Social Reaction and Critical Models of Crime**

In this chapter, we examine a large range of theories, with the common assumption that the reason for criminal behavior is factors outside of the traditional criminal justice system. Many social reaction theories, for example, are based on labeling theory, which proposes that it is not the individual offender who is to blame but rather the societal reaction to such early antisocial behavior. Furthermore, this chapter examines the critical perspective, which blames the existing legal and economic structure for the “criminal” label used against most offenders.

## **Chapter 10. Feminist Models of Crime**

This chapter examines the theoretical feminist perspectives of crime. Feminist criminology evolved when various assumptions and stereotypes about women in criminal justice were being questioned. Such questions included women as both offenders and victims. We discuss the importance of research regarding female offending, which was largely neglected in nearly all previous research before the late 19th century, and then discuss the extant literature that has been produced in recent years. This chapter discusses how important it is to examine the research done on female offending and how key it is to understanding why women are so much less likely to commit serious violent offenses than males—and perhaps using that understanding to reduce male chronic offending in society.

## **Chapter 11. Life-Course Perspectives of Criminality**

This chapter examines the various theoretical perspectives that emphasize the predisposition and influences present among individuals who begin committing crime at early versus later ages. We also examine the various stages of life that tend to have a high influence on an individual’s state of criminality (e.g., marriage) as well as the empirical studies that have examined these types of transitions in life. Finally, we examine the various types of offenders and the kinds of transitions and trajectories that tend to influence their future behavior, along with various policy implications that can be suggested by such models of criminality.

## **Chapter 12. Integrated Theoretical Models and New Perspectives of Crime**

In this chapter, we present the general theoretical framework for integrated models. Then, we introduce criticisms of such integration of traditional theoretical models.

In addition, we present several integrated models of criminality, some of which are based on micro-level factors and others based on macro-level factors. Finally, we examine the weaknesses and strengths of these various models based on empirical studies that have tested their validity.

## NEW TO THIS EDITION

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- All chapters have been substantially updated with the latest theoretical extensions and empirical research, such as like behavioral economics, risk terrain modeling, the integrated cognitive antisocial potential (ICAP) theory, and more. Additionally, the relevance of the theory (and subsequent research) to criminal justice policy and links to cross-national and cross-cultural issues has been expanded throughout.
- Chapter 11 on developmental and life-course criminology has been expanded to include a history of criminal careers as well as more recent theoretical frameworks.
- Where relevant, links have been made to specific theories and recent events, including the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis as well as the coronavirus pandemic.
- Coverage of critical topics, such as the influence of employment on criminal behavior, the success of early childhood and school-based delinquency prevention programs, and federal sentencing guidelines regarding crack versus powder cocaine, have been expanded throughout.
- Statistics, graphs, and tables have all been updated to demonstrate the most recent trends in criminology.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS FOR THE THIRD EDITION

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***Author's Note:** Stephen G. Tibbetts passed away in 2019. His acknowledgments from the third edition have been retained as written to honor his memory and those who meant so much to him over the years.*

**Stephen G. Tibbetts** would first like to thank executive editor Jessica Miller. Jessica's faith in and commitment to the project is greatly appreciated, and she has provided excellent guidance in making this new edition much better than the previous versions of this text. I also owe much gratitude to my very able production editor, Laureen Gleason. They kept up a most useful three-way dialogue among author, publisher, and a parade of excellent reviewers, making this text the best that it could possibly be. My copy editor, Megan Markanich, spotted every errant comma, dangling participle, and missing reference in the manuscript, for which I am truly thankful. Thank you one and all. I would like to express our great appreciation for Jerry Westby, the editor for the first two editions of this text. Jerry remains a very close friend. Jerry, I wish you well in the next stage of your life!

I also would like to thank the various individuals who helped me complete this book. First, I would like to thank the professors I had as an undergraduate at the University of Florida, who first exposed me to criminological theory. These professors include Ronald Akers and Lonn Lanza-Kaduce, with a special thanks to Donna Bishop, who was the instructor in my first criminological theory course. I would also like to thank the influential professors I had at the University of Maryland, including Denise Gottfredson, Colin Loftin, David McDowell, Lawrence Sherman, and Charles Wellford. I give a very special acknowledgment to Raymond Paternoster, who was my primary mentor and adviser and exerted an influence words can't describe. Ray and his wife, Ronet Bachman, provided rare support as surrogate parents when I was in graduate school. Ray also introduced me to the passion for criminological theory that I hope is reflected in this book.

I would like to thank Alex Piquero, also at the University of Maryland, with whom I had the great luck of sharing a graduate student office in the mid-1990s and who is now a professor at the university. Without the many collaborations and discussions about theory that I had with Alex, this book would be quite different and would likely not exist. Alex and his wife, Nicole Leeper Piquero, have consistently been key influences on my perspective on and understanding of theories of crimes, especially contemporary models (and the works of both of the Piqueros are represented in this book).

In addition, I would like to thank several colleagues who have helped me subsequent to my education. First, I would like to thank John Paul Wright at the University of Cincinnati and Chris Gibson at the University of Florida for inspiring me to further explore biosocial and developmental areas of criminality. Also, I would like to thank Donna Derbish and Matthew Logan at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), who provided much help in the compilation of materials for this book. In addition, I would like to especially thank Pamela Schram and Larry Gaines, fellow professors at CSUSB, who have provided the highest possible level of support and guidance during my career. Furthermore, it should be noted that Pamela Schram provided key insights and materials that aided in the writing of several chapters of this book. Finally, I would like to thank Jose Rivera, an award-winning lecturer at CSUSB, for sharing his experiences in his more than 8 years of being a prisoner in California State prisons and providing material for this and other books and articles; he is a true friend and colleague.

My mother and father, Jane and Steve Tibbetts Sr., have been the key to all of my accomplishments. We don't get to choose our parents, but I won the lottery by having them to guide me through life.

I owe the most gratitude to my wife, Kim, who has patiently put up with me typing away for the past few years while working on various versions of this book. Her constant support and companionship are what keep me going; she is the most supportive companion anyone could ask for.

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---

**Alex R. Piquero** would like to first thank Kim and Rian Tibbetts and SAGE for asking me to be part of this book. There is nothing I could do better to honor Steve's legacy than to continue to have his voice continue to be part of the criminological conversation.

I met Steve when we started graduate school in fall 1996 at the University of Maryland College Park. That department, that faculty, and that place were firing on all cylinders. We learned from the best, I am telling you. Doug Smith, Ray Paternoster, Sally Simpson, Laure W. Brooks, Doris MacKenzie, Charles Wellford, Denise Gottfredson, Larry Sherman, and David McDowall. And our graduate student colleagues who pushed us equally hard: Paul Mazerolle, Bobby Brame, Denise Herz, Lori Elis, Adam Dobrin, Miriam Sealock, and Stephanie Picolo Manzi. The best part was being Steve's office mate. Although I can't write everything here that I want to, suffice it to say we pushed each other to the maximum. Every day and every night we would talk theory, and methods, and policy—and of course football. We studied for comps every Friday over a plate of wings. We ate lunch together all the time at Marathon Deli (those who know know). Lots of nights out, but we'd always come back around to talking theory. We both had the absolute honor of having Ray Paternoster as our mentor and friend—lots of good times were had by the three of us. Unfortunately, we lost Ray too with his unexpected passing in the last few years. I would also like to thank my parents, Jorge and Nelly Piquero, who came to the United States as teenage Cuban political refugees and sacrificed so much for me and my brother. They always told me to work hard, work harder, and if you think you've worked enough, go work some more, because there's always someone working right then. Finally, I want to thank Nicole Leeper Piquero, my wife, colleague, and best friend, who also had the privilege of knowing Steve for his whole career. She makes me want to be better in every single way on every single day.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



The photo of Alex (on the left) and Steve (on the right).

**Stephen G. Tibbetts** pursued an understanding of criminal offending for the past two decades. He attempted to discover the extent to which individuals' inherent dispositions and attitudinal traits contribute to their offending decisions, especially in relation to other factors, such as demographic, developmental, and situational considerations. Dr. Tibbetts's research included work on the differences between men and women in their decisions to commit deviant behavior, as well as their perceptions of risk and consequences of getting caught. His additional research interests included the effects of perinatal disorders as an influence in future criminality, the etiology of white-collar crime, gang intervention, and citizens' attitudes regarding various forms of pornography.

Dr. Tibbetts published nine books and more than 50 scholarly papers examining various issues in criminology. He received the annual Outstanding Professor Award at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), in 2011. Dr. Tibbetts taught at East Tennessee State University for 4 years prior to coming to CSUSB. He served as a court-appointed special advocate in Washington County, Tennessee, for several years, where he directed the disposition of numerous juvenile court cases. He continued this work as a child advocate in San Bernardino County from 2000 to 2006.

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College of Criminal Justice/City University of New York, University of Florida, Northeastern University, and Temple University. He has published over 475 peer-reviewed articles in the areas of criminal careers, race/immigration and crime, crime prevention, criminological theory, and quantitative research methods, and has authored several books, including *Key Issues in Criminal Careers Research: New Analyses from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (Cambridge University Press, with David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein), *Handbook of Quantitative Criminology* (Springer, with David Weisburd), and *Developmental Criminology and the Crime-drop: A Comparative Analysis of Criminal Careers in Two Birth Cohorts* (Cambridge University Press, with Jason Payne). His work has been cited over 50,000 times (h-index = 118). A 2019 article in *Plos Biology* included him among the top 100,000 most-cited scientists in the world. In November 2019 and November 2020, he was recognized by the Web of Science Group as one of the world's most influential researchers (i.e., a highly cited researcher). He has served as executive counselor with the American Society of Criminology, member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel Evaluating the National Institute of Justice, member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on a Prioritized Plan to Implement a Developmental Approach in Juvenile Justice Reform, member of the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Modernizing the Nation's Crime Statistics, member of the Racial Democracy, Crime and Justice Network at Ohio State University, and member of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Adolescent Development & Juvenile Justice. He has given congressional testimony on evidence-based crime prevention practices in the area of early family/parent training programs and has provided counsel and support to several local, state, national, and international criminal justice agencies, including various police and correctional agencies. In 2015, Attorney General Eric Holder appointed him to the Office of Justice Programs Science Advisory Board. In September 2019, Dallas mayor Eric Johnson appointed him to the Mayor's Task Force on Safe Communities, and Dallas County district attorney John Creuzot appointed him as a member of the DA's Urban Crime Initiative. In December 2020, Miami-Dade state attorney Katherine F. Rundle appointed him to the Executive Committee of the Continuing Justice Reform Commission. In March 2021, he was elected to the Council on Criminal Justice. Professor Piquero is past recipient of the American Society of Criminology's Young Scholar (2002) and E-Mail Mentor of the Year (2005) Awards, Fellow of both the American Society of Criminology (2011) and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (2011), recipient of the Western Society of Criminology President's Award (2017), recipient of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Bruce Smith Sr. Award (2019), and recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Division of Developmental & Life-Course Criminology of the American Society of Criminology (2020). He has also received numerous teaching awards, including the University of Florida's College of Arts & Sciences Teacher of the Year Award (2004), the University of Maryland's Top Terp Teaching Award (2008), the University of Texas Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award (2014), as well as the University of Texas at Dallas Diversity Award. In 2018, he was named to the University of Texas System's Academy of Distinguished Teachers. His research has been featured in the *New York Times*, Reuters, CNN, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Huffington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and the *Dallas Morning News*. NBC News Latino profiled him via an exclusive interview with *Washington Post* syndicated columnist Esther J. Cepeda.

# INTRODUCTION

Why do some people commit crime while others don't? Why does crime and its causes vary by the neighborhood you live in, your age, or the demographic composition of society? This is what the study of criminology is all about! This book explores the conceptual history of criminology as well as current theories and emerging topics. Without a doubt, all of us can relate directly to many of these theories; we may know friends or family members who fit dominant models of criminal behavior that attempt to explain criminal activity, or we may have been a victim of crime ourselves.

This introduction begins by describing what criminology is; what distinguishes it from other perspectives of crime, such as religion, journalism, and philosophy; and how definitions of crime vary across time and place. Then it examines some of the major issues used to classify theories of criminology. After exploring the various paradigms and categories and types of theory, we discuss what characteristics help to make a theory a good one—in criminology or any scientific field. In addition, we review the specific criteria for establishing causality—for showing which predictors or variables actually cause criminal behavior. We also explain why—for logistic and ethical reasons—few theories in criminology will ever meet the strict criteria required to prove that key factors actually cause criminal behavior. Finally, we look at the strengths and weaknesses of the various measures of crime, which are used to test the validity of all criminological theories, and what those measures reveal about how crime is distributed across various individuals, groups, and even places. Although the discussion of crime distribution, as shown by various measures of criminality, may seem removed from our primary discussion regarding theories of why certain individuals and groups commit

## Learning Objectives

Explain the difference between *mala en se* crimes and *mala prohibita* crimes.

Summarize the key findings regarding trends in homicide and other crimes in the United States.

Identify each of the characteristics of a good theory.

Identify the types of units of analysis in studying crime.

Describe the ways of measuring crime and their strengths and weaknesses.

Review the steps taken to establish causality.

more crime than others, nothing could be further from the truth. All theories of criminal behavior are judged based on how much each theory can explain the observed rates of crime shown by the measures of criminality among individuals and groups.

## WHAT IS CRIMINOLOGY, AND HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM OTHER EXAMINATIONS OF CRIME?

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**Criminology** is the scientific study of why people commit crime and why some places have more crime than others. Although many textbooks have more complex definitions of crime, the word *scientific* separates our definition from other perspectives and examinations of crime.<sup>1</sup> Philosophical and legal examinations of crime are based on logic and deductive reasoning, for example, by developing propositions for what makes logical sense. Journalists play a vital role in examinations of crime by exploring what is happening in criminal justice and revealing injustices and new forms of crime; however, many often rely on anecdotes or examples of crime as opposed to objective measures of criminality. However, this is starting to change. Many journalists reach out to academics for insights and perspectives into trends and potential factors for crime commission. As well, the Crime Report is a nonprofit information and resource network that publishes daily reporting on criminal justice news from the United States and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Although each has an important role to play, as a collective, philosophical, legal, and journalistic perspectives of crime are not scientific because they do not use the **scientific method**. Specifically, they do not develop specific predictions, known scientifically as **hypotheses**, which are based on prior knowledge and studies, and then go out and test these predictions through observation. Criminology is based on this scientific method, whereas other examinations of crime are not.

Instead, philosophers and journalists tend to examine a specific case, make conclusions based on that one example of a crime incident, and then leave it at that. Experts in these nonscientific disciplines do not typically examine a multitude of stories similar to the one they are considering, nor do they apply the elements of their story to an existing theoretical framework that offers specific predictions or hypotheses. Further, they do not test those predictions by observation. The method of testing predictions through observation and then applying the findings to a larger body of knowledge, as established by theoretical models, is solely the domain of criminologists, and it separates criminology from other fields. The use of the scientific method is a distinguishing criterion for many studies of human behavior, such as psychology, economics, sociology, and anthropology, which is why these disciplines are generally classified as **social sciences**; criminology is one of them.

To look at another perspective on crime, religious accounts are almost entirely based on dogmatic, authoritarian, or reasoning principles, meaning they are typically based on what some authority (e.g., the pope or the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran) has to say about the primary causes of crime and the best ways to deal with such violations. These ideas are not based on observations. A science like criminology is based not on authority or anecdotes but on empirical research—even if that research is conducted by

a 15-year-old who performs a methodologically sound study. In other words, the authority of the scientist performing the study does not matter; rather, the observed evidence and the soundness of the methodology—how the study was performed—are of utmost importance. Criminology is based on science, and its work is accomplished through direct observation and testing of hypotheses with applicable data, even if those findings do not fit neatly into logical principles or the general feelings of the public.

## WHAT IS THEORY?

**Theory** can be defined as a set of concepts linked together by a series of statements to explain why an event or phenomenon occurs. A simple way of thinking about theories is that they provide explanations of why the world works the way it does. In other words, a theory is a model of the phenomenon being discussed, which in this case is criminal behavior. Sometimes, perhaps often, theories—or parts of them—are incorrect, even if the predictions they give are highly accurate.

For example, in the early Middle Ages, most people, including expert scientists, believed Earth was the center of the universe because everything seemed to rotate and revolve around our home planet. If we wake up day after day and see the sun (or moon) rise and set in close to the same place, it appears that these celestial bodies are revolving around Earth, especially considering the fact that we don't feel the world around us moving. Furthermore, calendars predicting the change of seasons, as well as the location and phases of these celestial bodies (such as the moon), were accurate. However, although experts were able to predict the movements of celestial objects well and develop extremely accurate calendars, they had absolutely no understanding of what was actually happening. Later, when some individuals tried to convince the majority that they were wrong, specifically that Earth was not the center of the universe, they were condemned as heretics and persecuted, even though their theoretical models were correct.

The same type of argument could be made about Earth being flat; at one time, observations and all existing models seemed to claim it as proven and true. Some disagreed and decided to test their own predictions, which is how America was discovered by European explorers.



Source: © iStockPhoto.com / Romolo Tavan

► **Photo 1.1** Earth as seen from the surface of the moon. Theories of Earth as the center of the universe were dominant for many centuries, and scientists who proposed that Earth was not the center of the universe were often persecuted. Over time, the theory was proved false.

Still, many who believed Earth was round were persecuted or cast out of mainstream society in Europe at the time.

Two things should be clear: Theories can be erroneous, and accurate predictions can be made (e.g., early calendars and moon and star charts) using them, even though there is no true understanding of what is actually happening. One way to address both of these issues is to base knowledge and theories on scientific observation and testing. All respected theories of crime in the modern era are based on science; thus, we try to avoid buying into and applying theories that are inaccurate, and we continuously refine and improve our theories (based on findings from scientific testing) to gain a better understanding of what causes people to commit crime. Criminology, as a science, always allows and even welcomes criticism of its existing theoretical models. There is no emphasis on authority but rather on the scientific method and the quality of the observations that take place in testing the predictions. All scientific theories can be improved, and they are improved only through continued observation and empirical testing.

## Burke and Hare

During the 1820s, Edinburgh, Scotland, was a major center for those pursuing an education in medicine. Almost 60 years prior to Jack the Ripper, the first serial murderers, William Burke and William Hare, captured media attention. During a 12-month period, Burke and Hare killed 16 people in Edinburgh before being arrested in November 1828. What made these killings so sordid was that Burke and Hare committed them for the sole purpose of selling the cadavers to medical schools for dissection and medical research. They were assisted by Burke's companion, Helen M'Dougal, and Hare's wife, Margaret. Burke and Hare would lure their victims with alcohol. Then, they would suffocate their inebriated victims by lying on their chests and holding their mouths and nostrils closed. Subsequently, Burke and Hare would sell these cadavers, "no questions asked," to Dr. Robert Knox, a promising anatomist.

During the trial, Hare was granted immunity in return for testifying against Burke. Burke was

found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. He was hanged on January 28, 1829. Ironically, the next day, Burke's cadaver was donated to the University of Edinburgh, where Professor Alexander Monro conducted the dissection in the anatomical theater.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the University of Edinburgh Anatomical Museum has an exhibit of William Burke's skeletal remains. A description of the exhibit ends with a 19th-century children's rhyme:

Up the close and down the stair  
In the house with Burke and Hare  
Burke's the butcher  
Hare's the thief  
Knox the boy who buys the beef.<sup>4</sup>

In January 2016, Arthur and Elizabeth Rathburn from Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan (6 miles outside of Detroit), were indicted for

running a black-market body part business. The Rathburns obtained most of the cadavers from two Chicago-area body donation labs. Many of the families who donated the bodies of their loved ones did so with the belief that they would go to science. A number of these cadavers were infected with HIV, hepatitis B, and other diseases. The Rathburns would use chainsaws, band saws, and reciprocating saws to butcher these cadavers for body parts. The Rathburns stored body parts from more than 1,000 people inside a warehouse. Subsequently, they would sell these butchered body parts to medical and dental trainees. However, they sometimes did

not disclose to their customers that these body parts were infected with disease.<sup>5</sup>

More than 180 years separate these two cases; the technological expertise needed to carry out these crimes significantly changed during this time. However, one consistent theme that links these two cases is motive—monetary gain. This is one of the most fascinating aspects to studying crime—although technology may have changed how crimes are committed (e.g., Internet fraud), have the explanations changed? Studying motives and factors (e.g., poverty, peer influences, low self-control) that cause such motives is the primary topic of this book.

## WHAT IS CRIME?

Definitions of crime vary drastically. For example, some take a **legalistic approach** to defining crime, including only acts specifically prohibited in the legal codes of a given jurisdiction. The problem with such a definition is that what is a crime in one jurisdiction is not necessarily a crime in other jurisdictions. To clarify, some acts, such as murder and armed robbery, are against the law in virtually all countries and all regions of the United States, across time and culture. These are known as acts of **mala in se**, literally meaning *evil in itself*.<sup>6</sup> Typically, these crimes involve serious violence and shock the society in which they occur, and most people would believe that these acts are criminal and should be punished.

Other crimes are known as acts of **mala prohibita**, which has the literal meaning of *evil because prohibited*. This term acknowledges that these crimes are not inherently evil acts; they are determined to be illegal because the law says so.<sup>7</sup> A good example is prostitution, which is illegal in most of the United States but is legal and even licensed in most counties of Nevada. The same can be said about gambling and drug possession or use, as is the case with recent laws passing the sale of limited amounts of marijuana. These are just examples of acts that are criminal only in certain places or at certain times and thus are not agreed upon by most members of a given community.



Source: © iStockphoto.com / fotografix

► **Photo 1.2** Prostitution is considered a *mala prohibita* offense because it is not inherently evil and is even legal in many jurisdictions around the world.



This book examines both mala in se and mala prohibita types of offenses, as well as other acts of **deviance**, which are not against the law in many places but are statistically atypical and may be considered more immoral than illegal. For example, in Nevada in the 1990s, a young man watched his friend (who was later criminally prosecuted) kill a young girl in the bathroom at a casino, but he told no one. Although most people would claim that this was highly immoral, at that time, the Nevada state laws did not require people who witnessed a killing to report it to authorities. (Note: As a result of this event, Nevada made withholding such information a criminal act.) Therefore, this act was deviant because most people would find it immoral, but it was not criminal because it was not technically against the law in the jurisdiction at that time.

Other acts of deviance are not necessarily immoral but are certainly statistically unusual and violate social norms, such as purposely “passing gas” at a formal dinner. Such activities are relevant for our discussion, even if they are not defined as criminal by the law, because they show a disposition toward antisocial behavior, which is often found in individuals who are likely to become criminal offenders. Furthermore, some acts are moving from deviant to illegal all the time, such as using cell phones to talk or text while driving or smoking cigarettes in public; many jurisdictions are moving to have these behaviors made illegal and have been successful, especially in New York and California.

Most mala in se acts (e.g., murder) are highly deviant, too, meaning they are not typically found in society, but many, if not most, mala prohibita acts are not deviant because they are committed by most people at some point. Speeding on a highway is a good example of a mala prohibita act that is illegal but not deviant. This book examines theories for all of these types of activities, even those that do not violate the law in a given jurisdiction at the present time.

## HOW ARE CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES CLASSIFIED? THE MAJOR THEORETICAL PARADIGMS

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Scientific theories of crime can be categorized based on several important concepts, assumptions, and characteristics. To begin, most criminological theories are classified by the paradigm they emphasize. **Paradigms** are distinctive theoretical models or perspectives; in the case of crime, they vary based largely on opposing assumptions of human behavior. There are four major paradigms.<sup>8</sup>

The first of these, commonly referred to as the **classical school** perspective of which deterrence and rational choice theories emanate from, is discussed at length later in this book. It assumes that individuals have free will and choose to commit crimes based on rational, hedonistic decisions; they weigh out the potential costs and benefits of offending and then choose what will maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. The distinguishing characteristic of these theories is that they emphasize the free choice individuals have in committing crime. The other paradigms are based on the influence of factors other than free will or rational decision-making—for example, biology, culture, parenting, and economics.

Another category of theories is positivism, which is different from the perspective emerging from the classical school. These theories argue that individuals do not have free will or rationality in making decisions to commit crime. Rather, the **positive school** perspective assumes that individuals are passive subjects of determinism, which means that people do not freely choose their behavior. Instead, their behavior is strongly influenced by factors outside their free will and/or control, such as genetics, IQ, education, employment, peer influences, parenting, and economics.<sup>9</sup> Most of the highly respected and scientifically validated criminological theories of the modern era fall into this category.<sup>10</sup>

Another group of criminological theories belongs to the conflict or critical perspective, which emphasizes the use of law as a reaction or tool to enforce restraint on others by those in power or authority; it also involves how society reacts when a person (often a juvenile) is caught doing something wrong. These theories emphasize group behavior over individual behavior: Groups in power use the criminal codes as a tool in keeping people who have limited power restrained or confined. This perspective is often used to explain the differential application and administration of the justice system apparatus to less powerful groups, historically and even contemporarily, communities, and persons of color.

Finally, over the past few decades, a new category has emerged, namely the **integrated theories**, which attempt to combine the best aspects of explanatory models into a single, better theoretical framework for understanding crime. Some criminologists criticize these models because they suffer from the logical inconsistencies inherent in integrating theoretical models that have different assumptions of human nature and decision-making. All of these categories will become clearer as we progress through this book.

## Additional Ways to Classify Criminological Theories

Although the major paradigms are the primary way criminological theories are classified, there are several other ways they can be categorized. Specifically, theoretical models can be classified based on whether they focus on individuals or groups as their primary units of examination. For instance, some theories emphasize why certain individuals do or do not commit crime. This level of investigation, in which the focus is on the individual, is often referred to as the **micro level of analysis**, much as microeconomics is the study of economics on the individual (person) level. When your instructors score each student on an exam, this is a micro-level analysis.

On the other hand, many theories emphasize primarily the group or **macro level of analysis**, much as macroeconomics is the study of economic principles at the aggregate or group level. In this book, some chapters are separated by whether the individual or the group level of analysis is emphasized. For example, social process theories tend to be more micro-level oriented, whereas social structure theories are more macro-level oriented. Here's a good example: If instructors compare the mean score (or average) of one class to the mean score of another, this is a comparison of group rates, regardless of the performance of any individual in either class. A great theory would explain both the micro and macro levels of analysis; historically few theories have incorporated both micro and macro levels of analysis into one perspective, but this is slowly changing.<sup>11</sup>



Criminological theories can also be classified by their general perspective on how laws are made. Some theories assume laws are made to define acts as criminal to the extent that they violate rights of individuals, and thus, virtually everyone agrees that such acts are immoral. This type of perspective is considered a **consensus perspective** (or nonconflict model). On the other hand, many modern forms of criminological theories fall into an opposite category, commonly known as the **conflict theories**, which assume that different groups disagree about the fairness of laws and that laws are used as a tool by those in power to keep down other, lower-power groups (whether based on race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation). There are many forms of both consensual and conflict theoretical models, and both are specifically noted as we progress through the book.

A final, but perhaps most important, way to classify theories is in terms of their assumptions regarding human nature. Some theories assume that people are born good (e.g., giving, benevolent) and are corrupted by social or other developmental influences that lead them to crime. A good example is strain theory, which claims that people are born innocent and with good intentions but that they experience strainful events that lead them to adapt negatively and potentially engage in crime. On the other hand, many of the most popular current theories claim that virtually all individuals are born with a disposition toward being bad (e.g., selfish, greedy) and must be socialized or restrained from following their inherent propensities for engaging in crime.<sup>12</sup> A good example of this is control theory, which assumes that all individuals have a predisposition to be greedy, selfish, violent, and so on (i.e., they are criminally disposed), and therefore people need to be controlled or prevented from acting on their natural, inherent disposition toward selfish and aggressive behaviors.

A variation of these theories is often referred to as *tabula rasa*, literally translated as “blank slate.” This assumes that people are born with no leaning toward good or bad but are simply influenced by the balance of positive or negative influences introduced socially during their development. A good example of this perspective is differential association or reinforcement theory, which assumes that all individuals are born with a blank slate and that they learn whether to be good or bad based on what they experience and especially whom they associate with.

Although the dominant assumption tends to vary across these three models from time to time, the most popular theories today (which are self- and social-control theories) seem to imply the second option, specifically that people are born selfish and greedy and must be socialized and trained to be good and conforming.<sup>13</sup> There are other ways criminological theories can be classified, but the various characteristics we have discussed in this chapter summarize the most important factors.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD THEORIES

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Respected scientific theories in any field, whether it be chemistry, physics, or criminology, tend to have the same characteristics. After all, the same scientific review process (i.e., blind peer review by experts) is used in all sciences to determine which studies and theoretical works are of high quality. The criteria that characterize a good theory

in chemistry are the same as those used to judge a criminological theory. Such characteristics include parsimony, scope, logical consistency, testability, empirical validity, and policy relevance.<sup>14</sup> Each of these characteristics is examined here. (It should be noted that our discussion and many of the examples provided for the characteristics are taken from Akers, Sellers, and Jennings, 2020.<sup>15</sup>)

**Parsimony** is achieved by explaining a given phenomenon—in our case criminal activity—in the simplest way possible. All else being equal, the simpler a theory, the better. The problem with criminal behavior is that it is highly complex. However, that has not stopped some criminologists from attempting to explain this convoluted phenomenon in highly simple ways. For example, one of the most recent and most popular theories (as indicated by the amount of related research and by which theories the experts believe are most important) is the theory of low self-control (which we discuss later in this book). This simple model holds that one individual characteristic—low self-control—is largely responsible for most forms of criminal activity. The originators of this theory, Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, asserted that every act of crime and deviance is caused by this same factor: low self-control.<sup>16</sup> Everything from speeding, smoking tobacco, not wearing a seat belt while driving, and having numerous sex partners to committing serious crimes such as murder and armed robbery are due, in large part, to low self-control.

Although this theory has been criticized and disputed, it remains one of the most popular and empirically supported models of the modern era.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, despite the criticisms of this theory, many notable criminologists still believe it is the best single model of offending presented to date. In addition, there is little doubt that this model has become the most researched theoretical model over the last two decades.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most important reason why so much attention has been given to this theory is its simplicity, putting all of the focus on a single factor. Virtually all other theoretical models have proposed multiple factors that may play major parts in determining why individuals commit crime. After all, as some scholars have claimed, how can low self-control explain corporate crime? Some self-control is required to obtain a white-collar position of employment. It is true that a simple theory is better than a more complex one, as long as other characteristics are equivalent. However, given the complexity of criminal behavior, it is unlikely that a simple explanation, such as naming one factor to account for everything, will prove adequate.

**Scope**, the next characteristic of a theory, indicates how much of a given phenomenon the theory seeks to explain. This is somewhat related to parsimony in the sense that some theories, like the theory of low self-control, seek to explain all crimes and all deviant acts as well. Thus, the theory of low self-control has a wide scope. Other theories of crime, such as some versions of strain theory, may seek to explain only property crime or drug use. However, the wider the scope of what a theory can explain, the better the theory, assuming other characteristics are equal.

**Logical consistency** is the extent to which a theory makes sense in terms of its concepts and propositions. It is easier to show what we mean by logical consistency if we give examples of what does not fit this criterion. Some theories simply don't make sense because of the face value of their propositions. For example, Cesare Lombroso, called the father of criminology, claimed that the most serious offenders are “born criminals,”

biological throwbacks to an earlier stage of evolutionary development who can be identified by their physical features.<sup>19</sup> Lombroso, who is discussed at more length later in this book, claimed that tattoos were one of the physical features that identified these born criminals. This doesn't make sense, however, because tattoos are not biological physical features—no baby has ever been born with a tattoo. Moreover, many more people have tattoos and do not commit crime. This criticism will make even more sense when we discuss the criteria for determining causality later in this chapter.

Another prominent example of theories that lack logical consistency is the work of early feminist theorists, such as Freda Adler, who argued that as females gain educational and employment opportunities, their rates of crime will be more likely to converge with those of males.<sup>20</sup> Such hypotheses were logically inconsistent with the data available at the time they were presented and are even more inconsistent with the data available today; the facts show that females who are given the most opportunities commit the fewest crimes, while females who have not been given these benefits commit the most crimes.

These are just two examples of how past theories were logically inconsistent with the data available at the time they were created, not to mention inconsistent with future research findings, which have dismissed their hypotheses.

**Testability** is the extent to which a theory can be put to empirical, scientific testing. Some theories simply cannot be tested. A good example is Sigmund Freud's theory of the psyche. Freud described three domains of the psyche—the conscious ego, the subconscious id, and the superego—but none of these domains can be observed or tested.<sup>21</sup> Although some theories can be influential without being testable (as was Freud's theory), other things being equal, it is a considerable disadvantage for a theoretical model to be untestable and unobservable. Fortunately, most established criminological theories can be examined through empirical testing.

**Empirical validity** is the extent to which a theoretical model is supported by scientific research. Obviously, this is highly related to the previous characteristic of testability. However, while virtually all accepted modern criminological theories are testable, that does not mean they are equal in terms of empirical validity. Although some integrated models (meaning two or more traditional theories that have been merged together; these are examined later in this book) have gained a large amount of empirical validity, these models are able to improve their ability to predict crime because they merge the best of two or more models, even when the assumptions of these models are not compatible. The independent theoretical model that has garnered the most empirical validity is differential reinforcement theory, which has been strongly supported for various crime types (from tobacco usage to violence) among a wide variety of populations (from young children to elderly subjects).<sup>22</sup>

Empirical validity is perhaps one of the most important characteristics used in determining how good a theory is at explaining a given phenomenon or behavior. If a theory has good empirical validity, it is an accurate explanation of behavior; if it does not have good empirical validity, it should be revised or dismissed because it is simply not true.

**Policy implications** refer to the extent to which a theory can create realistic and useful guidance for changing the way society deals with a given phenomenon. In our case, this means providing a useful model for informing policymakers of how to deal

with crime. An example is the broken windows perspective in policing, which says that to reduce serious crime, authorities should focus on the minor incivilities, that is, trash and disorder, that occur in a given area. This theory has been used successfully by many police agencies (most notably by New York City police, who reduced their homicide rate by more than 75% in the past decade). Other theories may not be as useful in terms of reducing crime because they are too abstract or propose changes that are far too costly or impossible to implement, such as theories that emphasize changing family structure or the chromosomal makeup of individuals. So, other things being equal, a theory that has readily available policy implications would be more advantageous than theories that do not.

## Criteria for Determining Causality

There are several criteria for determining whether a certain variable causes another variable to change—in other words, causality. For this discussion, we use standard scientific notation to designate an independent or predictor variable ( $X$ ) that results in a dependent or explanatory variable ( $Y$ ). Such criteria are used for all scientific disciplines, whether chemistry, physics, biology, or criminology. In this book, we are discussing crime, so we concentrate on examples that relate to this goal, but some examples are given that are not crime related. Unfortunately, we will also see that, given the nature of our field, there are important problems with determining causality, largely because we are dealing with human beings as opposed to a chemical element or biological molecule.

The three criteria needed to show causality are (1) temporal ordering, (2) correlation or covariation, and (3) accounting for spuriousness.

**Temporal ordering** requires that the predictor variable ( $X$ ) precede the explanatory variable ( $Y$ ) if we are to determine that  $X$  causes  $Y$ . Although this seems simple enough, it is sometimes violated in criminological theories. For example, you'll remember that Lombroso claimed born criminals could be identified by tattoos, which obviously goes against this principle.

A more recent scientific debate has focused on whether delinquency is an outcome variable ( $Y$ ) due to associations with delinquent peers and associates ( $X$ ) or whether delinquency ( $X$ ) causes associations with delinquent peers and associates ( $Y$ ), which then leads to even more delinquency. This can be seen as the argument of which came first, the chicken or the egg. Studies show that both processes are often taking place, meaning that delinquency and associations with delinquent peers are likely to be both predictor and explanatory variables in most cases, and this forms a reciprocal or feedback loop that encourages both causal paths.<sup>23</sup> Thus, temporal ordering is an important question, and often it is complex and must be examined fully before causal order can be understood.

**Correlation**, or **covariation**, is the extent to which a change in the predictor ( $X$ ) is associated with a change (either higher or lower) in the explanatory variable ( $Y$ ). In other words, a change in  $X$  leads to a change in  $Y$ . For example, a rise in unemployment ( $X$ ) in a given location is likely to lead to a rise in crime rates ( $Y$ ) in the same area; this would be a positive association because both increased. Similarly, an increase in employment ( $X$ ) is likely to lead to a decrease in crime rates ( $Y$ ) in that area; this would be a



► **Photo 1.3** Early theories identified criminals by whether they had tattoos; at that time, this might have been true. In contemporary times, many individuals have tattoos, so this would not apply.

negative, or inverse, association, because one decreased and the other increased. The criterion of covariance is not met when a change in  $X$  does not produce any change in  $Y$ . That is, if a statistically significant change in  $X$  does not lead to a statistically significant change in  $Y$ , then this criterion is not met.

However, correlation alone does not mean that  $X$  causes  $Y$ . For example, if ice cream sales ( $X$ ) tend to be highly associated with crime rates ( $Y$ ), this does not mean that ice cream sales cause higher crime rates. Rather, other factors—in this case, warm weather—lead to increases in both sales of ice cream and the number of people who are outdoors in public areas and interacting, which naturally

leads to greater opportunities and tendencies to engage in criminal activity. This brings us to the final criterion for determining causality.

Accounting for **spuriousness** is a complicated way of saying that, to determine that  $X$  causes  $Y$ , other factors (typically called  $Z$  factors) that could be causing the observed association must be accounted for before we can be sure that it is actually  $X$  that is causing  $Y$ . In other words, it is often a third factor ( $Z$ ) that causes two events to occur together in time and place. A good example of a spurious association would be the observation that a greater number of firefighters at the scene of a fire is correlated with more damage. If only the first two criteria of causality were followed, this would lead to the conclusion that an increased number of fire officers ( $X$ ) causes the heavier fire damage ( $Y$ ). This conclusion meets the temporal ordering and covariance criteria. However, a third  $Z$  variable or factor is causing both  $X$  and  $Y$  to appear together. This  $Z$  variable is the size of the fire, which is causing more officers to show up and also causing more damage. Once this  $Z$  factor is accounted for, the effect of  $X$  on  $Y$  becomes nonexistent.

Using the Lombroso example, tattoos may have predicted criminality at the time he wrote (although criminals weren't born with them). However, Lombroso did not account for an important  $Z$  factor—namely, associates or friends who also had tattoos. This  $Z$  factor caused the simultaneous occurrence of both other factors. To clarify, individuals who had friends or associates with tattoos tended to get tattoos, and (especially at that time in the 1800s) friends or associates who had tattoos also tended to commit more crime. In that era, pirates and incarcerated individuals were most likely to get tattoos. Therefore, had Lombroso controlled for the number of tattooed associates of the criminals he studied, he likely would have found no causal effect on crime from body art.

Researchers in criminology are fairly good at determining the first two criteria of causality: temporal ordering and covariance or correlation. Most scientists can perform classical experiments that randomly assign subjects either to receive or not to receive the experimental manipulation to examine the effect on outcomes. However, the dilemma

for criminologists is that the factors that appear to be important (according to police officers, parole agents, and corrections officers) are family variables, personality traits, employment variables, intelligence, and other similar characteristics that cannot be experimentally manipulated to control for possible Z factors. After all, how can we randomly assign certain people or groups to bad parents or bad educations, no jobs, low IQs, bad genetics, or delinquent peers? Even if we could manage such manipulations, ethical constraints would prohibit them.

Thus, as criminologists, we may never be able to meet all the criteria of causality, so we are essentially stuck with building a case for the factors we think are causing crime by amassing as much support as we can in terms of temporal ordering and covariance or correlation, and perhaps accounting for other factors in advanced statistical models. Social science, especially criminology, is a difficult field in terms of establishing causality, and we shall see that the empirical validity of various criminological theories is hindered by such issues.

## MEASURES OF CRIME

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Crime can be measured in a variety of ways. To some extent, you have probably measured crime by observing what has been happening in your own neighborhood or reading or watching the news every day—which you should do to stay informed! However, some measures of crime go beyond these anecdotal or personal experiences, and these more exacting measures are what criminologists commonly use to gauge rates and trends about crime among people and across time and place.

Specifically, three major categories of crime measures are used by social scientists to examine crime. The first and most commonly used measure is the **Uniform Crime Report (UCR)**, which started in the United States in 1929. Police departments nationwide send reports about certain crimes and arrests to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which combines the many thousands of reports they receive from across the nation and publishes the UCR annually.

The second measure is the **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**; prior to the early 1990s, it was known as the National Crime Survey [NCS]). Like the UCR, this report is issued by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), but the data are collected differently. Specifically, interviews are conducted with a large, random sample of U.S. households, asking how much crime they have experienced in half-year intervals. The NCVS is collected by the research branch of the DOJ, called the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau, which was one of the earliest agencies to collect information about citizens and thus is the most experienced at such endeavors.

The third measure, which is perhaps the most important for purposes of this book, is **self-report data (SRD)**, which are primarily collected by independent academic scientists or think tank agencies, such as the RAND Corporation. When participating in surveys or interviews, individuals report the crimes they have committed as well as their own victimization experiences. This measure is the most important for the purposes of this book because the UCR and NCVS do not provide in-depth information on the



offenders or the victims, such as personality, biology or physiology, family life, and economic information. These factors are of the utmost importance for our purposes because there is a broad consensus that they influence why people commit crime, yet they are missing from the most commonly used measures of crime. SRD are the best, and in most cases the only, measure for identifying and understanding why some people offend and others do not. However, like the other measures, self-reports have numerous weaknesses as well as strengths.

Each of these three measures is briefly examined here. Although the measures are not the primary emphasis of this book, it is important to understand their strengths and weaknesses to develop a more comprehensive understanding of criminal activity.

## The Uniform Crime Report

The UCR is the oldest and most used measure of crime rates in the United States for purposes of examining trends and distribution of crime. Although its origins date back to the first part of the 20th century, and not surprisingly changes have been made to it, it is relatively stable in terms of comparing various years and decades. As mentioned, the data are collected by many thousands of independent police agencies in the United States, including county, city, and state police. These thousands of agencies send their reports of crimes and arrests to their respective state capitals, which then forward their synthesized reports to FBI headquarters, where all reports are combined to provide an overview of crime in the nation.

FBI definitions of crime often differ from state categorizations, and how crimes are differentiated is important to future discussions in this chapter. The FBI concentrates on eight (four violent and four property) **index offenses**, or Part I offenses. The four

violent crimes are murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible (not statutory) rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (which involves intentions of serious injury to the victim). The four property offenses are burglary (which includes a breaking and entering or trespass), motor vehicle theft, larceny (which does not involve trespassing; e.g., shoplifting), and arson (which was added to the crime index count in the late 1970s). All reports to police for these eight offenses are included in the crime index, whether or not they resulted in an arrest. This information is often referred to as crimes known to police (CKP).

The UCR also includes about two dozen other offenses known as **nonindex offenses**, or Part II offenses, which

Source: © iStockphoto.com / mixmotive



► **Photo 1.4** The annual UCRs are produced by the FBI. Local, county, and state criminal justice agencies send their annual crime data to the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington, DC. UCR data are, by their nature, incomplete, as many crimes are never reported to the police and some crimes are not categorized within the UCR. This dark figure of crime might be as high as 90% of all crime incidents.

are reported only if an arrest is made. These offenses range from other violent crimes (such as simple assault), to embezzlement and fraud, to offenses considered violations of the law only if an individual is under 18 years of age (such as running away from home). The major problem with the estimates of these nonindex offenses is that the likelihood of arresting someone for such crimes is less than 10% of the actual occurrence, so the data regarding nonindex offenses are highly inaccurate. The official count from the FBI is missing at least 90% of the actual offenses that take place in the United States. Therefore, we primarily concentrate on index offenses for the purposes of our discussion.

Even the count of index offenses has several problems. The most important and chronic problem with using the UCR as a measure of crime is that, most of the time, victims fail to report crimes—yes, even aggravated assault, forcible rape, robbery, burglary, and larceny. Recent studies estimate that about 70% to 80% of these serious crimes are not reported to police. Criminologists call this missing amount of crime the **dark figure** because it never shows up in the police reports submitted to the FBI.

There are many reasons why victims do not report these serious crimes to the police. One of the most important is that they consider it a personal matter. Many times, the offense is committed by a family member, a close friend, or an acquaintance. For instance, police are rarely informed about aggravated assaults among siblings. Rape victims are often assaulted on a date or by someone they know; they may feel that they are at risk of future harm if they notify the police or may believe that police won't take such a claim seriously. Regardless of the reason, many crime victims prefer to handle it informally and not involve the police.

Another major reason why police are not called is that victims don't feel the crime is important enough to report. For example, a thief may steal a small item that the victim won't miss, so she or he may not see the need to report what the police or FBI would consider a serious crime. This is likely related to another major reason why people do not report crime to the police: They have no confidence that reporting the case to law enforcement will do any good. Many people, often residents of neighborhoods that are the most crime-ridden, are likely to feel that the police will not seriously investigate their charges.

There are many other reasons why people do not report their victimizations to police. Some may fear retaliation, for example, in cases involving gang activity; many cities, especially those with many gangs, have seen this occur even more in recent years. The victims may also fail to report a crime for fear that their own illegal activities will be exposed; an example is a prostitute who has been brutally beaten by her pimp. In the United States, much crime is committed against businesses, but those businesses may be reluctant to report crimes because they don't want a reputation for being a hot spot for criminal activity. Sometimes when victims do call the police or 911, they leave the scene if the police fail to show up in a reasonable amount of time. This has become a chronic problem despite efforts by police departments to prioritize calls.

Perhaps the most chronic, most important reason for failure to report crimes—but one that is often ignored—can be traced to U.S. school systems. Most studies of crime and victimization in schools show that many and maybe even most juvenile crimes occur in schools, but these offenses almost never get reported to police, even when school resource



officers (SROs) are assigned to the school. Schools—and especially private schools—have a vested interest in not reporting crimes that occur on their premises to the police. After all, no school (or school system) wants to become known as crime-ridden.

Schools are at high risk of criminal activity because the most likely offenders and the most likely victims—young people—interact there in close quarters for most of the day. The school is much happier, however, if teachers and administrators deal informally with the parties involved in an on-campus fight; the school doesn't want these activities reported to and by the media. In addition, the student parties involved in the fight don't want to be formally arrested and charged with the offense, so they are also happy with the case being handled informally. Finally, the parents of the students are also generally pleased with the informal process because they don't want their children involved in a formal legal case.

Although universities and colleges are required by federal law to disclose crime information on their campus (and to the extent possible in the areas surrounding camps) (through the Clery Act), many crimes are not reported for many of the same reasons just noted. This is especially harder for crimes that occur off-campus, say in a downtown location even when students are involved. A good example can be seen on the websites of most major colleges, where official reports of crime, ranging from rape to liquor law violations, are often in the single digits each year for campuses housing many thousands of students. Of course, some crimes may not be reported to the school, and others may be dealt with administratively rather than by calling police. The absence of school data is a big weakness of the UCR.

Besides the dark figure, there are many other criticisms of the UCR as a measure of crime. For example, the way crimes are counted can be misleading. Specifically, the UCR counts only the most serious crime committed in a given incident. For example, if a person or persons rob, rape, and murder a victim, only the murder will show up in the UCR; the robbery and rape will not be recorded (although this is being rectified in the National Incident Based Reporting System, or NIBRS, which documents all crimes that occurred in the incident as well as a wider range of circumstances of the offender and victim). Furthermore, there are inconsistencies in how the UCR counts the incidents; for example, if a person walks into a bar and assaults eight people there, it is counted as eight assaults, but if the same person walks into the bar and robs every person of wallets and purses, it is counted as one robbery. This makes little sense, but it is the official count policy used by the UCR.

Other, more important criticisms of the UCR involve political considerations, such as the fact that many police departments (such as in Philadelphia and New York City) have systematically altered the way crimes are defined, for example, by manipulating the way classifications and counts of crimes are recorded (e.g., aggravated assault [an index crime] vs. simple assault [a nonindex crime]). Thus, official estimates can make it seem as if major crimes have decreased in the city when in fact they may have actually increased.

A final problem with the UCR is that, for the most part, it remains as it was when it was first introduced in 1929. A recent National Academy of Sciences Panel on Modernizing Crime Statistics noted several of the problems associated with the UCR, including its lack of updating certain types of “newer” crimes, like Internet fraud, health care fraud, and related computer crimes.

Even with these weaknesses, it is also important to note the strengths of the UCR. Because the UCR is the longest-lasting systematic measure of crime in the United States, it offers us the advantage of being able to examine trends in crime over most of the 20th century and into the 21st century. We will see later that there have been extremely high crime rates at certain times (such as during the 1930s and the 1970s to 1980) and very low crime rates at other times (such as the early 1940s and recent years [late 1990s to the present]). Other measures, such as the NCVS and national SRD, did not come into use until much later, so the UCR is important for the fact that it started so early.

Another important strength of this measure is that two of the offenses the UCR concentrates on are almost always reported and therefore overcome the weakness of the dark figure, or lack of reporting to police. These two offenses are murder or nonnegligent manslaughter and motor vehicle theft. Murder is almost always reported because a dead body is found; few murders go unreported to authorities. Although a few may elude official recording—for example, if the body is transported elsewhere or carefully hidden—almost all murders are recorded. Similarly, motor vehicle theft, a type of property crime, is almost always reported because any insurance claims must provide a police report. Most cars are worth thousands (or at least many hundreds) of dollars, so victims tend to report when their vehicles have been stolen; this provides a valid estimate of property crime in specific areas. The rest of the offenses (yes, even the other index crimes) counted by the UCR are far less reliable. If someone is doing a study on homicide or motor vehicle theft, the UCR is likely the best source of data, but for any other crime, researchers should probably look elsewhere.

This is even further advised for studies examining nonindex offenses, which the UCR counts only when someone is arrested for a given offense. The vast majority of nonindex offenses do not result in an arrest. To shed some light on how much actual nonindex crime is not reported to police, it is useful to examine the **clearance rate** of the index offenses in the UCR, our best indicator of solving crimes. Even for the crimes the FBI considers most serious, the clearance rate is about 21% of crimes reported to police (“reported to police” meaning that police made a report of the crime). Of course, the more violent offenses have higher clearance rates because (outside of murder) they inherently have a witness, namely the victim, and because police place a higher priority on solving violent crimes. However, for some of the index crimes, especially serious property offenses, the clearance rates are very low. Furthermore, it should be noted that the clearance rate of serious index crimes has not improved over the past few decades despite much more advanced resources and technology, such as DNA testing, fingerprints, and faster cars. These data on the clearance rates are only for the most serious, or index, crimes; thus, the reporting of the UCR regarding nonindex crimes is even more inaccurate because there is even less reporting (i.e., the dark figure) and less clearance of these less serious offenses. In other words, the data provided by the UCR regarding nonindex offenses are invalid and thus for the most part worthless.

The UCR is good for (a) measuring the overall crime rate in the United States over time, (b) examining what crime was like prior to the 1970s, and (c) investigating murder and motor vehicle theft. Outside of these offenses, the UCR is limited (including the speed through which it is published and available to the public), and fortunately, we have better measures for examining crime rates in the United States.

## The National Crime Victimization Survey

Another commonly used measure of crime is the NCVS (the NCS until the early 1990s), which is distinguished from other key measures of crime because it concentrates on the victims of crime, whereas other measures tend to emphasize the offenders. In fact, that is the key reason why this measure was started in 1973 after several years of preparation and pretesting. To clarify, one of the key recommendations of Lyndon Johnson's President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice in the late 1960s was to learn more about the characteristics of victims of crime; at that time, virtually no studies had been done on the subject, whereas much research had been done on criminal offenders. The efforts of this commission set into motion the creation of the NCVS.

Since it began, the NCVS has been designed and collected by two agencies: the U.S. Census Bureau and the BJS, which is one of the key research branches of the DOJ. The NCVS is collected differently from the other commonly used measures of crime; the researchers select tens of thousands of U.S. households, and each member of the household who is over 12 years of age is interviewed every 6 months about crime that occurred in the previous 6-month period (each selected household remains in the survey for 3 years, resulting in seven collection periods, including the initial interview). Although the selection of households is to some extent random, the way the sampling is designed guarantees that a certain proportion of the selected households have certain characteristics. For example, before the households are selected, they are first categorized according to factors such as region of the country, type of area (urban, suburban, rural), income level, and racial or ethnic composition. This type of sampling, called a multistage, stratified cluster sampling design, ensures that enough households are included in the survey to permit conclusions regarding these important characteristics. As you will see later in this chapter, some of the most victimized groups (by rate) in the United States do not comprise a large portion of the population or households. So, if the sampling design were not set up to select a certain number of people from certain groups, it is likely the researchers would not obtain enough cases to draw conclusions about them.

The data gathered from this sample are then adjusted, and statistical estimates are made about crime across the United States, with the NCVS estimates showing about 3 times more crime than the UCR rates. Some may doubt the ability of this selected sample to represent crime in the nation, but most studies find that its estimates are far more accurate than those provided by the UCR (with the exception of homicide and maybe motor vehicle theft). This is largely due to the expertise and professionalism of the agencies that collect and analyze the data, as well as the carefully thought out and well-administered survey design, as indicated by interview completion rates (which are typically more than 90% higher than those of virtually all other crime and victimization surveys).

One of the biggest strengths of the NCVS is that it directly addresses the worst problem with the previously discussed measure, the UCR. Specifically, the greatest weakness of the UCR is the dark figure, or the crimes that victims fail to report, which happens most of the time (except in cases of homicide or motor vehicle theft). The NCVS interviews victims about crimes that happened to them, even those that were not reported to police. Thus, the NCVS captures far more crime events than the UCR,

especially crimes that are highly personal (such as rape)—and most recently supplements to measure identity theft have been useful given the increasing incidence of this crime type as more and more people are connected and conduct banking and purchasing through the Internet. The extent to which the NCVS captures much of this dark figure of crime is its greatest strength.

Despite this important strength, the NCVS, like the other measures of crime, has numerous weaknesses. Probably the biggest problem is that two of the most victimized groups in U.S. society are systematically not included in the NCVS. Specifically, homeless people are left out because they do not have a home and the participants are contacted through households, yet they remain one of the most victimized groups per capita in our society. Another highly victimized group in our society that is systematically not included in the NCVS is young children. Studies consistently show that the younger a person is, the more likely they are to be victimized. Infants in particular, especially in their first hours or days of life, face great risk of death and other sorts of victimization, typically from parents or caregivers. This is not surprising, especially in light of the fact that young children cannot defend themselves or run away. They can't even tell anyone until they are old enough to speak, and then most are too afraid to do so or are not given an opportunity. Although, to some extent, it is understandable to exempt young children from such sensitive questions, the loss of this group is huge in terms of estimating victimization in the United States.

The NCVS also misses the crimes suffered by American businesses, which cumulatively constitute an enormous amount of crime. In the early years of the NCVS, businesses were also sampled, but that practice was discontinued in the late 1970s. Had it continued, it would have provided invaluable information for social scientists and policymakers, not to mention the businesses losing billions of dollars each year as a result of crimes committed against them.

Many find it surprising that the NCVS does not collect data on homicide, which most people and agencies consider the most serious and important crime. Researchers studying murder cannot get information from the NCVS but must rely on the UCR, which is most accurate in its reporting for this crime type.

The NCVS also has issues with people accurately reporting the victimization that has occurred to them in the previous 6 months. However, studies show that their reports are surprisingly accurate most of the time. Often when participants report incidents inaccurately, they make unknowing mistakes rather than intentionally lying. Obviously, victims sometimes forget incidents that have occurred, probably because, most of the time, they know or are related to the person committing the offense against them, so they never think of it as a crime per se but rather as a personal disagreement. When asked if they were victims of theft, they may not think to report the time that a brother or uncle borrowed a tool without asking and never returned it.

Although NCVS researchers go to great lengths to prevent it, a common phenomenon known as **telescoping** tends to occur, which leads to overreporting of incidents. Telescoping is the human tendency to perceive events as having occurred more recently than they actually did. This is one of the key reasons why NCVS researchers interview household subjects every 6 months, but telescoping still happens. For instance, a larceny may have occurred 8 months ago, but it seems as if it happened just

a few months ago to the participant, so it is reported to the researchers as occurring in the past 6 months when it really didn't. Telescoping thus inflates national crime rate estimates for a given interval.

As mentioned, an additional weakness is that the NCVS did not start until 1973, so it cannot provide any estimates of victimization prior to that time. A study of national crime rates prior to the 1970s has little choice but to use the UCR. Still, for most crimes, the NCVS has provided a more accurate estimate over the past three decades. Since the NCVS was created, the crime trends it has revealed have tended to be highly consistent with those shown by the UCR. For example, both measures show violent crime rates peaking at the same time (about 1980), and both agree on when the rates increased (the 1970s) and decreased (the late 1990s to the present) most. This is good, because if they did not agree, that would mean at least one of them was wrong. At the same time, there are a few discrepancies between the UCR and NCVS for some specific crimes, such as rape, which was noted in the UCR section earlier in this chapter. Before we discuss the national trends in crime rates, however, we examine the strengths and weaknesses of a third measure of crime.

### Self-Report Studies of Crime

The final measure of crime consists of various self-report studies of crime, in which individuals report (in either a written survey or an interview) the extent of their own past criminal offending or victimization and other information. There is no one systematic study providing a yearly estimate of crime in the United States; rather, self-report studies tend to be conducted by independent researchers or institutes. Even when they do involve a national sample (such as the National Youth Survey [NYS]), they almost never use such data to make estimates of the extent of crime or victimization across the nation.

This lack of a long-term, systematic study that can be used to estimate national crime rates may be the greatest weakness of self-report studies; however, this very weakness—not having a universal consistency in collection—is also its greatest strength. To clarify, researchers can develop their questionnaires to best fit the exact purposes of their study. For example, if researchers are doing a study on the relationship between a given personality trait (e.g., narcissism) and criminal offending, they can simply give participants a questionnaire that contains a narcissism scale and items that ask about past criminal behavior. Of course, these scales and items must be checked for their reliability and validity, but this is a relatively easy way to directly measure and test the hypotheses the researcher is most concerned about.

Some question the accuracy of SRD because they believe participants typically lie, but most studies have concluded that participants generally tell the truth. Specifically, researchers have compared self-reported offenses to lie detector machine results, readministered the same survey to the same individuals to see if they answer the same way each time (called test-retest reliability), and cross-checked self-reported arrests with police arrest data. All of these methods have shown that most people tend to be truthful when answering surveys.<sup>24</sup>

The most important aspect of self-report surveys is that they are the only available source of data for determining the social and psychological reasons people commit crime.

The UCR and NCVS have virtually no data on the personality, family life, biological development, or other characteristics of criminal offenders, which are generally considered key factors in the development of criminality. Therefore, although we examine the findings of all three measures in the next chapter, the vast majority of the content we cover in this book are based on findings from self-report studies, which provide the ideal means of testing hypotheses derived from the many criminological theories you will read throughout this book.

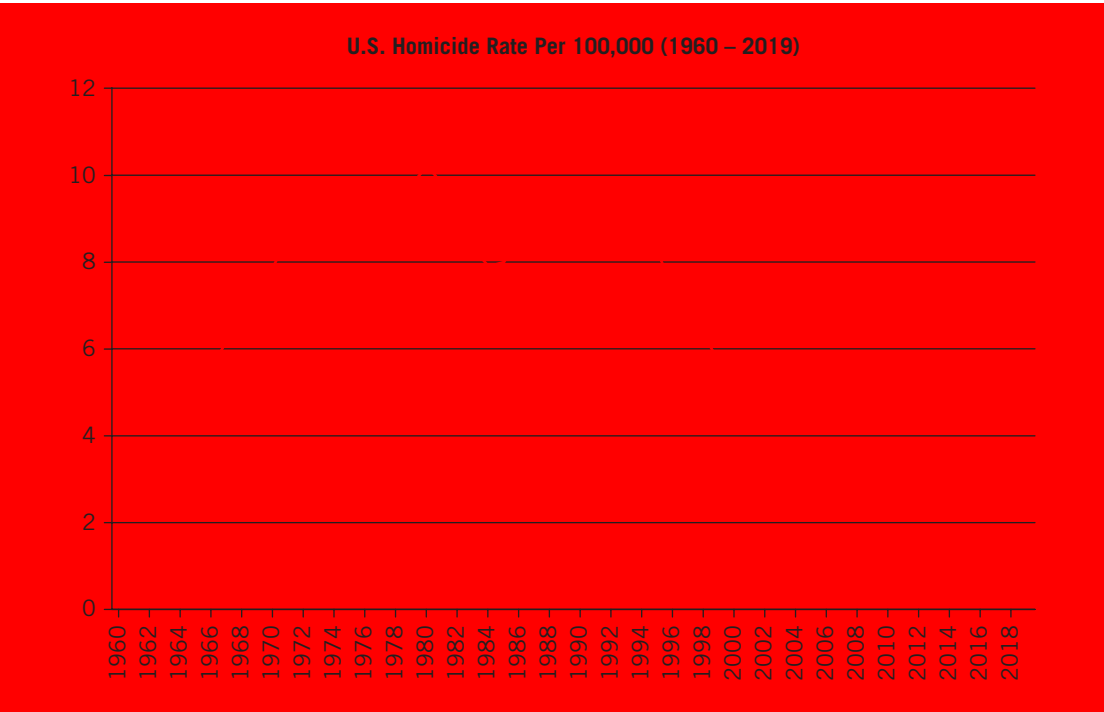
### **What Do the Measures of Crime Show Regarding the Distribution of Crime?**

It is important to examine the most aggregated trends of crime, namely the ups and downs of overall crime rates in the United States across different decades. We start with crime in the early 1900s—largely because the best data started being collected during this era and also because the 20th century (and the most recent decades of the 21st century) is most relevant to our understanding of the reasons for our current crime rates. However, most experts believe that the U.S. crime rate, whether in terms of violent or property offending, used to be far higher prior to the 20th century; historians have arrived at this conclusion based on sporadic, poorly recorded documentation from the 18th and 19th centuries. By virtually all accounts, crime per capita (especially homicide) was far higher in the 1700s and 1800s than at any point after 1900, which is likely due to many factors but perhaps most importantly because formal agencies of justice, such as police and corrections (i.e., prisons, parole), did not exist in most of the United States until the middle or end of the 1800s. Up to that time, it was up to individual communities or vigilantes to deal with offenders.

Therefore, there was little ability to investigate or apprehend criminals and no means to imprison them. But, as industrialization increased, the need to establish formal police agencies and correctional facilities evolved as a way to deal with people who offended in modern cities. By 1900, most existing states had formed police and prison systems, which is where our discussion begins (see Figure 1.1).

The level of crime in the United States, particularly homicide, was relatively low at the beginning of the 20th century, perhaps because of the formal justice agencies that had been created during the 19th century. For example, the first metropolitan U.S. police departments were formed in Boston and then New York during the 1830s; in the same decade but a bit earlier, the first state police department, the Texas Rangers, had been established, and the U.S. Marshals Service had been founded still earlier. Although prisons started in the late 1790s, they did not begin to resemble their modern form or proliferate rapidly until the mid-1800s. The first juvenile court was formed in the Chicago area in 1899. The development of these formal law enforcement and justice agencies may have contributed to the low levels of crime and homicide in the very early 1900s. (Note: Our discussion of the crime rate in the early 1900s primarily deals with homicide because murder records constitute the only valid records of crime from that time; the UCR did not originate prior to 1929. Most people consider homicide the most serious crime, and its frequency typically reflects the overall crime rate.)

**Figure 1.1 Homicide Rates in the United States**



Source: FBI.

Note: The 2001 rate includes deaths attributed to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The effects of the creation of these formal agencies did not persist long into the 20th century. Looking at the level of homicides that occurred in the United States, it is obvious that large increases took place between 1910 and 1920, likely because of extremely high increases in industrialization as the U.S. economy moved from an agricultural to an industrial emphasis. More important, population growth was rapid as a result of urbanization. Whenever high numbers of people move into an area (in this case, cities) and form a far denser population (think of New York City at that time or Las Vegas in current times), it creates a crime problem. This is likely due to there being more opportunities to commit crimes against others; after all, when people are crammed together, it creates a situation in which there are far more potential offenders in close proximity to far more potential victims. A good modern example of this is high schools, which studies show have higher crime rates than city subways or other crime-ridden areas, largely because they densely pack people together, and in such conditions, opportunities for crime are readily available. Thus, the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the early 1900s is probably the most important reason for the increase in homicide and crime in general in the United States at that time.



The largest increases in U.S. homicide in the early 1900s occurred during the 1920s and early 1930s, with the peak level of homicide coming in the early 1930s. Criminologists and historians have concluded that this huge increase in the homicide rate was primarily due to two factors beyond the industrialization and urbanization that explained the increase prior to the 1920s. First, the U.S. Congress passed a constitutional amendment that banned the distribution and consumption of alcohol beginning in 1920. The period that followed is known as Prohibition. This legal action proved to be a disaster, at least in terms of crime, and Congress later agreed—but not until the 1930s—by passing another amendment to do away with the previous amendment that banned alcohol. For about 14 years, which notably recorded the highest U.S. rates of homicide and crime before 1950, the government attempted to stop people from drinking.

Prior to Prohibition, gangsters had been relatively passive and had not held much power. However, the ban on alcohol gave the black market a lot of potential in terms of monetary profit and reasons for killing off competition. Some of the greatest massacres of rival gangs of organized crime syndicates (e.g., the Italian Mafia) occurred during the Prohibition era. The impact on crime was likely only one of the many problems with Prohibition, but it was a very important and deadly one for our purposes. Once Prohibition ended in the early 1930s, homicide and crime rates decreased significantly, which may have implications for modern drug policies. According to studies, many banned substances today are less violence-inducing or violent-related than alcohol, which studies show is the one substance most implicated in crime—especially violent crime. For example, most criminologists believe the current war on drugs may actually be causing far more crime than it seeks to prevent (even if it may be lowering the number of drug addicts) due to the black market it creates for drugs in demand, much like the case with alcohol during Prohibition, and targeting communities and persons of color, which has resulted in a disproportionate amount of minorities in jails and prisons.

Another major reason why the homicide rate and overall crime levels increased so much during the early 1930s was the Great Depression, which sent the United States into an unprecedented state of economic upheaval. Most historians and criminologists agree that the stock market crash of the late 1920s was a primary contributor to the large numbers of homicides in the early 1930s. We return to this subject later when we examine the classic version of strain theory, which emphasizes economic structure and poverty as the primary causes of crime.

Although the homicide and crime rate experienced a significant drop after Prohibition was eliminated, a likely reason for this decrease was the social policies of the New Deal, which was implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Such policies included those that created new jobs for people hit hardest by the Depression through programs such as Job Corps and the Tennessee Valley Authority, both of which still exist today. Although such programs likely aided economic (and thus crime) recovery in the United States, world events of the early 1940s provided the greatest reasons for the huge decreases seen at that time.

The entry of the United States into World War II was probably the biggest contributor to decreasing U.S. crime in the early 20th century. As you will notice, homicides decreased dramatically during the 4 years (1941–1945) that hundreds of thousands of



young men (the most likely offenders and victims) were sent overseas to fight on two fronts, Europe and the South Pacific. Anytime a society loses a huge portion of the most common offenders, namely young (teenage to 20s) males, it can expect a drop in crime like the one the United States experienced in the 1940s. However, at the end of 1945, most of these men returned and began making babies, which triggered the greatest increase in babies that U.S. society had ever seen. This generation of babies started what historians call the baby boom, which would have the greatest impact on crime levels that has ever been recorded in U.S. history.

Although crime rates increased after soldiers returned home from overseas in the late 1940s, they did not rise to anywhere near the levels present during Prohibition and the Great Depression. Alcohol was legal, and the economy was doing relatively well after World War II. During the 1950s, the crime level remained relatively low and stable until the early 1960s, when the impact of the baby boom emerged in terms of the crime rate. If a large share of the population is made up of young people, particularly teenage or early-20s males, the crime rate will almost inevitably go up. This is exactly what occurred in the United States, starting in the early 1960s, and it led to the largest 10-year increase in crime that the country has ever seen.

### **The Baby Boom Effect**

The UCR shows that the greatest single-decade increase in the crime rate occurred between 1965 and 1975. In that time, the overall crime rate more than doubled, an unprecedented increase. Notably, this increase occurred during the war on poverty, which was set into motion by President Lyndon B. Johnson in a program he termed the Great Society; the crime increase thus turned many people and policymakers against having the government address economic issues to improve society. However, this was the era in which most people in society belonged to young age groups, which predisposed the nation to the high crime rates experienced at this time, and age is one of the strongest correlates of crime.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the following generation, called Generation X, which includes those individuals born between 1965 and 1978, had a low birth rate, which may have contributed to the low crime rates observed in recent years.

The high numbers of young people in society were not the only societal trend going on during the late 1960s and early 1970s that would lead to higher crime rates. For example, a large number of people were being arrested as a result of their participation in the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and anti-Vietnam War activities. Perhaps most important, the 1970s showed the highest levels of drug usage and favorable attitudes toward drugs since accurate national studies had first been conducted. Virtually all measures of drug usage peaked during the 1970s or early 1980s.

So, many things came together between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s to usher in the greatest increase in the crime rate the United States has ever seen, culminating in the peak of 1980. All of our measures agree that crime, especially homicide, reached its highest level about that year. Although other periods, such as the mid- to late 1980s into the early 1990s, showed similar increases in crime, largely due to the crack epidemic and juvenile offending, no other period showed higher rates than 1980, most likely due to an increase in the number of adolescents and their high drug usage.

Crime levels declined somewhat in the early 1980s and then rose again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the crime and homicide rate never exceeded the 1980 peak. Furthermore, after 1994, the crime rate decreased drastically every year for about a decade, to the point that it dropped to as low as it had been in the early 1960s. The U.S. crime rate is currently around where it was about 50 years ago. The one exception to this is the increases the country has seen in both shootings and homicides in most large U.S. cities since the first quarter of 2020 that some have attributed to the stress and anxiety and increased gun sales associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest that emerged during the summer in part due to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>26</sup>

There are many reasons for this huge decrease over the past two decades. One of the biggest is that the population has a relatively smaller proportion of young people than it did during the 1960s and 1970s, but obviously there is more to the picture. Drug usage, as well as favorable attitudes toward drugs, has decreased significantly in recent years. Other explanations associated with the crime decline of the United States include an improving economy, the advent of problem-oriented policing and the adoption of COMPSTAT and hot-spots policing, and an increase in incarceration—though this latter explanation has also been criticized given that America tends to imprison more people than any other developed country in the world.

Almost all crime tends to be nonrandom. Consistent with this, the crime measures show a number of trends in which crime occurs among certain types of people, in certain places, at certain times, and so on. We turn to an examination of such concentrations of crime, starting with large macro differences in crime rates across regions of the United States.

## RATES OF CRIME

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### Regional and City Differences

Crime tends to be higher in certain regions of the country. According to the UCR, the United States is separated into four regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. For the past few decades, crime rates (based on crime per capita) have been significantly higher in two of these regions: the South and the West. These two regions consistently have higher rates than the other regions, with one or the other having the highest rates for violence or property offenses or both each year. Some studies have found that, when poverty levels are accounted for, much of the regional difference is explained away. Although this is a simple conclusion, the studies seem to be consistent in tying regional differences to variations in social factors, notably socioeconomic levels.

Regardless of the region, there seems to be extreme variation from high to low crime rates across states and cities within each of these large regions. For example, crime measures show that certain U.S. states and jurisdictions have consistently high crime rates. The two standouts are Louisiana and the District of Columbia, with the latter having an extremely high rate of homicide compared to the national average.

Another question is why crime rates in states or jurisdictions, or in cities and counties, vary drastically from one region to the next. For instance, Camden, New Jersey, one of the cities in the lower-rate Northeast region according to the UCR, had the highest rate of crime among all U.S. cities in the years 2004 and 2005. Detroit, Michigan, was second worst for both of these years; it used to be number one before Camden outdid it. At the same time, however, New Jersey had some of the safest cities in the nation for these years—2 of the 10 safest cities are in New Jersey, which shows how much crime can vary from place to place, even those in relatively close proximity. Notably, in some recent estimates from the FBI, the cities of St. Louis and New Orleans exhibited the highest rates of serious violent crimes. An important factor for New Orleans was the devastation of the city's infrastructure after Hurricane Katrina, which essentially wiped out the city's criminal justice system and resources, while St. Louis has struggled with gun violence that some have attributed to gangs and drugs.

Crime has also been found to cluster within a given city, whether the overall city is relatively low crime or high crime. Virtually every area (whether urban, suburban, or rural) has what are known as **hot spots**, or places that have high levels of crime activity. Such places are often bars, liquor stores, or other types of businesses, such as bus stops and depots, convenience stores, shopping malls, motels and hotels, fast-food restaurants, check-cashing businesses, tattoo parlors, or discount stores (such as dollar stores). However, hot spots can also be residential, such as homes that police are constantly called to for domestic violence or apartment complexes that are crime-ridden—something often seen in subsidized housing areas.

Even the nicest of cities and areas have hot spots, and even the worst cities and areas also tend to have most of their police calls coming from specific addresses or businesses. This is one of the best examples of how crime does not tend to be random. Many police agencies have begun using spatial software on computer systems to analyze where the hot spots in a given city are and to predict where certain crimes are likely to occur in the future. This allows more preventive patrols and proactive strategies in such zones. One criminological theory, routine activities theory, is largely based on explaining why hot spots exist.

### **Rates of Crime According to Time of Day and Time of Year**

Another way that crime is known to cluster is by time of day. This varies greatly depending on the type of group being examined. For example, juvenile delinquency and victimization, especially for violence, tends to peak sharply at 3:00 p.m. on school days (about half of the days of the year for children), which is the time that youths are most likely to lack supervision (i.e., children are let out of school and are often not supervised by adults until they get home). On the other hand, adult crime and victimization, especially for violence, tends to peak much later on, at about 11:00 p.m. on almost all days, which is a sharp contrast to the juvenile peak in midafternoon. These estimates are primarily based on FBI and UCR data.

To some extent, the peak hour for juveniles is misleading; other non-police-based estimates show that just as much crime is going on during school, but schools tend not to report it. As stated previously, this widespread lack of reporting by schools occurs because none of the parties involved wants a formal police report taken. Typically, the

youth doesn't want to be arrested; the child's parents don't want their daughter or son to be formally processed by police; and most important, no school wants to become known as a dangerous place. Thus, the police are typically called only in extreme cases—for example, if a student pulls a gun on another student or actually uses a weapon.

This underreporting also occurs at colleges and universities because such institutions depend largely on tuition for funding, and this goes down if enrollment levels decline. After all, no parents want to send their teenagers to a college that is high in crime. Federal law now requires virtually all colleges to report their crime levels to the public, so there is a lot at stake if police take formal reports on crime events. Thus, most colleges, like K–12 school systems, have an informal process in place so that even violent crimes can often be handled informally.

Crimes, especially violent ones, tend to peak significantly during the summer. Studies show that criminals tend to be highly opportunistic, meaning that they happen to be going about their normal activities when they see an opportunity to commit a crime, as compared to a more hydraulic model, in which an offender actually goes out looking to commit a crime. Because criminals are like everyone else in most ways, they tend to be out and about more in the summer, so they are more likely to see opportunities at that time. Furthermore, youths are typically out of school during the summer, so they are often bored and not supervised by adults as much as during the traditional school year. Burglary tends to rise exponentially during the summer, an increase that may be linked to the fact that people go on vacation and leave their homes vacant for weeks or months at a time. All of these factors come together to produce much higher rates in the summer than in any other season.

A couple of crimes, such as murder and robbery, tend to have a second peak in the winter, which most experts believe is due to high emotions during the holidays, additional social interaction (and often the drinking of alcohol) during the holidays, and an increase in wanting money or goods for gift giving, which would explain robbery increases at that time. These offenses are the exception, however, not the rule. Most offenses, including murder and robbery, tend to peak during warmer summer months.

## **Rates of Crime According to Age and Gender**

Age is perhaps the most important way that crime and victimization tend to cluster in certain groups. Almost no individual gets arrested before the age of 10; if one does, it is a huge predictor that the child is likely to become a habitual, chronic offender. However, between the ages of 10 and 17, the offending rate for all serious street crimes (i.e., FBI index crimes) goes up drastically, peaking at an average age of 17. Then the offending rates begin decreasing significantly, such that by the time people reach the age of 20, the likelihood of being arrested has fallen in half as compared to the middle teens. This offending level continues to decline throughout life for all of the serious index crimes, although other crimes, such as white-collar crimes, tax evasion, and gambling, are likely to be committed more often at later ages, in large part because opportunities for those types of crime emerge in adulthood.

The extraordinarily high levels of offending in the teenage years have implications for how we prevent and deal with juvenile delinquency and help explain why society

struggles to prevent habitual offenders from committing so many crimes. We are often good at predicting who the most chronic, serious offenders are by the time they are in their 20s, but that does little good because most offenders have committed most of their crimes before they hit 20 years old. Thus, while most adult offenders were juvenile offenders, the majority of juvenile offenders do not become adult offenders.

Another important characteristic related to crime and victimization is gender. In every society, at every time in recorded history, males have committed far more serious street crimes (both violent and property) than females. It appears there is almost no closing of this gap in offending—at least for FBI index crimes—and it is also a finding observed using self-reports. Even in the most recent years, males have been the offenders in 80% to 98% of all serious violent crimes (murder, robbery, aggravated assault, forcible rape) and have made up the vast majority of offenders in property index crimes (burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, and larceny). The fact that larceny is committed more frequently by males often surprises people because the most common type of larceny is shoplifting, which people often perceive as being done mostly by women. All studies show that men commit most of the larcenies in the United States. It is important to realize that males in all societies throughout the world commit the vast majority of offenses, and the more violent and serious the crimes are, the more men are represented.

However, there are a few nonindex crimes that females commit as much as, or more than, males. Specifically, in terms of property crimes, embezzlement and fraud are two offenses that females commit at rates comparable to those for men, which likely has to do with enhanced opportunities to commit such crimes. Most of the workforce is now female, which wasn't true in past decades, and many women work in banking and other businesses that tempt employees by having large amounts of money available for embezzling. In terms of public disorder, prostitution arrests tend to be mostly female, which is not too surprising.

The only other offense in which females are well represented is running away from home, which is a status offense (illegal for juveniles only). However, virtually all sources and studies of offending rates (e.g., self-report studies) show that male juveniles run away far more than females, but because of societal norms and values, females get arrested far more than males. Feminist theories of the patriarchal model (in short, men are in charge and dominate or control females) and the chivalry model (females are treated differently because they are seen as more innocent) argue that females are protected as a type of property. This may be important in light of the opposing findings regarding female and male rates of running away versus female and male rates of being arrested for running away. The bottom line is that families are more likely to report missing girls than missing boys and more likely to press law enforcement agencies to pursue girls who have run away than boys who have done so. We explore explanations for such differences later, particularly in the chapter in which we cover conflict and feminist theories of crime.

### **Rates of Crime According to Population Density**

Victimization and offending rates are also clustered according to the density of a given area. All sources of crime data show that rates of offending and victimization are far higher per capita in urban areas than in suburban and rural regions. Furthermore, this

trend is linear: The more rural an area, the lower the rates for crime and victimization. To clarify, urban areas have, by far, the highest rates for offending, followed by suburban areas; the least amount of crime and victimization is found in rural (e.g., farming) areas. This trend has been shown for many decades and is undisputed. Keep in mind that such rates are based on population in such areas, so this trend holds true even per capita for citizens in a given region. This is likely due to enhanced opportunities to commit crime in urban and even suburban areas, as well as the fact that rural communities tend to have stronger **informal controls**, such as family, church, and community ties.

Studies consistently show that informal controls are far more effective in preventing and solving crimes than are the **formal controls** of justice, which include all official aspects of law enforcement and justice, such as police, courts, and corrections (i.e., prisons, probation, parole).

A good example of the effectiveness of informal sanctions can be seen in the early formation of the U.S. colonies, such as the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In the early 1600s, crime per capita was at an all-time low in what would become the United States. It may surprise many that police and prisons did not exist then; rather, the low crime rate was due to high levels of informal controls: When people committed crimes, they were banished from society or were shunned.

As in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, even for what would now be considered a relatively minor offense (adultery), people were forced to wear a large letter (such as an *A* for adultery or a *T* for theft), and they were shunned by all others in their social world. Such punishments were (and still are) highly effective deterrents for offenders, but they work only in communities and/or societies with high levels of informal controls and a communitarianism mentality, such as Australia and Japan. Studies have shown that, in such societies, crime tends to be extremely low—in fact, so low that such communities may “invent” serious crimes so that they can have an identifiable group on which to blame societal problems. We saw this occur in the Massachusetts Bay Colony with the creation of a new offense, witchcraft, for which hundreds of people were put on trial and many were executed.

Such issues will be raised again later when we discuss the sociological theories of Émile Durkheim. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that some judges and communities have gone back to public-shaming punishments, such as making people carry signs of their offenses or putting the names of offenders in local newspapers. But the conclusion is that rural communities tend to have far higher informal controls, which keep their crime rates low. On the other hand, urban (especially inner-city) areas tend to be



Source: © Joe Amon / Denver Post / Getty Images

► **Photo 1.5** Offenders being forced to hold signs as part of their punishment is becoming a more popular informal sanction that shames individuals in their communities.



characterized by extreme economic disadvantage, which is related to collective efficacy or informal control where the community essentially polices itself.

Many crimes also tend to cluster according to social class, with the lower classes experiencing far more violent offending and victimization. This is consistently shown across all sources of data regarding criminal offending. Interestingly, the characteristics associated with offending tend to be a mirror image of those associated with victimization. To clarify, poor, young, urban males tend to have the highest rates of (serious) criminal offending—and this group also has the highest rates of victimization as a result of violent offending. This mirror image phenomenon is often referred to as the **equivalency hypothesis**. However, the equivalency hypothesis does not characterize the relationship between social class and property crimes. Specifically, members of middle- to upper-class households tend to experience just as much and often more victimization for property crimes than do lower-class households, but the most likely offenders in most property crimes are from the lower class. This makes sense; offenders will tend to steal from the people and places that have the most property or money to steal. This tendency has been found since criminological data were first collected, even back to the early 1800s, and it is often found today, although it is not consistently shown each year (e.g., in NCVS data). Nevertheless, the equivalency hypothesis holds true for violent crimes: Lower-class individuals, especially young, inner-city males, commit more violent crimes, and they are victimized more as a result of such violent crimes; the reasons for this are explored throughout the book as we consider how the various criminological theories can explain these relationships.

### Rates of Crime According to Race or Ethnicity

Another important way that crimes are clustered in U.S. society is by race or ethnicity. In terms of violent crimes, the most victimized group by far in the United States is Native Americans or American Indians. According to NCVS data, Native Americans are victimized at almost twice the rate of any other racial or ethnic group. This is likely due to the extreme levels of poverty and unemployment that exist on virtually all American Indian reservations. Although some Indian tribes have recently gained profits from operating gaming casinos on their lands, the vast majority of tribes in most states are not involved in such endeavors, so deprivation and poverty, and extreme substance abuse, are still common.

Although there is little offending data for this group, it is generally assumed that Native Americans have the highest rates of offending as well. This is a fairly safe assumption because research has clearly shown that the vast majority of criminal offending and victimization are **intraracial**. This means that crime tends to occur within a race or ethnicity (e.g., whites offending against whites) as opposed to being **interracial** or across races or ethnicities (e.g., white individuals offending against Black individuals).

Another major group that experiences an extremely high rate of victimization, particularly for homicide, is Black communities. (The term *Black* is used here, as opposed to *African American*, because this is what most measures [e.g., the UCR and NCVS] use and because many African Americans are not Black [e.g., many are citizens from Egypt or South Africa]). According to UCR data for homicide, which the NCVS does