

Sociology 554  
Fall, 2005  
Department of Sociology

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## **CAUSES OF CRIME**

### **Course Objectives**

This course has three objectives. The first is to introduce you to the literature on crime and delinquency, especially that literature dealing with the causes of crime and delinquency (I will offer a course on controlling crime next year). Much of this literature is described in the readings for the course. In addition, we will discuss the major reference and data sources in the field in order to better enable you to investigate this literature on your own. The second objective is to develop your ability to critically evaluate this literature. This will be accomplished through class discussions, the midterm exam, and the final paper. The third objective is to introduce you to the methods of criminological research so that you might contribute to the above literature. We will focus, in particular, on the methods of data collection and analysis that criminologists have used in testing theories and hypotheses. A series of short assignments will introduce you to the major method of data collection/analysis in criminology today: the analysis of survey data. You will have the opportunity to employ this or other methods of data collection/analysis in your final paper.

### **Course Outline**

The course is divided into two sections. The first deals with the nature and extent of crime/delinquency. Here we will examine the following questions: What is crime? How do we measure the extent of crime? How much crime is there? Is crime increasing? And what categories of people are most likely to commit crime (focusing on age, sex, race, and class)?

The second section focuses on the following question: What are the causes of crime? There are literally scores of theories that try to explain why certain individuals and groups are more likely to engage in crime. After briefly reviewing biological and psychological theories, we will focus on the leading social psychological and sociological theories of crime/delinquency. These theories argue that certain features of the social environment increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in crime. These theories currently dominate the field of criminology, and we will spend the bulk of the course analyzing them. We will then draw on these theories to examine the effect of certain institutions, like the family and school, on crime.

## **Course Web Site**

The course web site contains a copy of the syllabus, links to other web sites, and a “discussion board” where you will post your questions and comments on the readings (more below). You can get to the course web site by getting on the Emory internal home page, clicking on “blackboard” (under the “Computing and Networking” category), and then logging in to the blackboard system. (You can also access blackboard at <http://classes.emory.edu>). You will be asked for your userid and password when logging in. Your userid is the first part of your Emory email address (e.g., my email is bagnet@emory.edu, so my userid is bagnet). Your password is your seven digit Emory ID number (you can change your password after logging in; if you have used blackboard before, use your old password). Our course is named SOC554\_Agnew. Please email me if you have any problems logging onto our site.

## **Class Procedure**

Typically, each class will be divided into three parts -- with a 5 minute break between each part. The first part of class will be devoted to a discussion of the readings for that class. We will address your questions and comments about the readings, and I will often pose questions for the class or specific individuals. The second part of class will be devoted to a discussion of the assignment for that day. You will be asked, for example, to describe the theory of delinquency you have developed or the measure of delinquency you have constructed. I will provide an overview of the readings for the following week in the third part of class. This overview will help you put these readings in proper context. Class attendance is very important, and anyone who misses a class should be sure to borrow someone's notes and see me before the next class.

## **Course Requirements**

1. Class participation counts for 20% of your grade. Participation will be graded on frequency and the extent to which your comments/questions reflect a knowledge and thoughtful consideration of the readings. In this connection, I would like each of you to write at least one question/comment for at least three of the week's readings. Please **POST YOUR QUESTIONS ON OUR COURSE WEB SITE** (under “discussion board”) **BY MONDAY, 9 AM**. These questions/comments will form the basis of our discussion during the first hour of class.

Also, I will sometimes ask one or two individuals to prepare brief presentations on particular topics for the following class. The quality of these presentations will also help determine your participation grade.

2. The completion of several short assignments counts for 20% of your grade. You may work alone or in pairs on the assignments (see the Class Schedule for info on the assignments).
3. A midterm exam on November 7 counts for 25% of your grade. This exam will consist

of several essay questions, and will resemble a prelim exam in style and content. You will have three hours to complete this closed book/open note exam and you can take it anywhere you like. The exam is designed to help you review, integrate, and critically evaluate core materials on the nature, extent, and causes of crime. A study guide and list of questions from previous exams will be passed out two weeks before the exam.

4. A 15-20 page typed paper on a topic of your choice (but subject to my approval) counts for the remaining 35% of your grade. The paper is due by 5 PM on DECEMBER 19, and a list of grading criteria will be given out in class. A one page paper proposal is due by NOVEMBER 21, and each student will be asked to give a 15 minute presentation on their paper on NOVEMBER 21 or NOVEMBER 28.

### **Readings**

The textbooks for the course are:

Criminological Theories, by Ronald L. **Akers** and Christine **Sellers**. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2004 (fourth edition).

Criminological Theory: Past to Present, edited by Francis T. **Cullen** and Robert **Agnew**. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2003 (second edition). NOTE: This book is now being revised, and I will email you updated Introductions to each part where available.

Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control, by Robert **Agnew**. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2005 (second edition)

There is also a set of readings for the course. These readings are available through “Reserves Direct” (**RD**) at the Emory University Library. .

### **CLASS SCHEDULE**

Sept. 12 Introduction; The Definition, Measurement and Extent of Crime

Agnew, Chapters 2 and 3

RR: Elliott et al., "Reconciling Race and Class Differences ...."

Sept. 19 The Characteristics of Criminals/Delinquents

RD: Agnew, Chapter 4

Reread Elliott et al.

RD: Hawkins et al., “Race, Ethnicity,....”

RD: Steffensmeier and Allan, “Looking for Patterns: Gender, Age....””

RD: Visher, “Career Criminals....”

Akers and Sellers, Chapter 1

Assignment #1: Develop your own theory of crime/delinquency. In one typed page, describe a) the independent variable(s) in your theory, b) the intervening mechanisms by which your independent variable(s) affects crime/delinquency, and c) the types of crime/delinquency that your theory applies to (if it applies to all types, do you think your theory is more relevant to some types than others).

Sept. 26 Causes of Crime: Overview of Crime Theories and Biological/Psychological Theories

Akers and Sellers, pp. 17-19

Cullen and Agnew, pages 15-81, 450-469

RD: Piquero and Moffitt, "Explaining the Facts of Crime..."

Assignment #2: Based on your theory of crime/delinquency, develop or select one or more measures of delinquency from the Youth and Deterrence Survey or another data set. Provide me with a typed list of the items in your measure(s).

Oct. 3 Causes of Crime: Strain Theory

Akers and Sellers, pages 164-174, 179-182

Cullen and Agnew, pages 171-197, 208-217

RD: Agnew, "An Empirical Test of General Strain Theory..."

RD: Agnew, "General Strain Theory: Current Status and Directions..."

Assignment #3: Access the Youth and Deterrence Survey (or whatever survey you are working with) and produce a frequency distribution for your delinquency measure(s). Provide me with a copy of the computer printout. **OR** Find an article that tests your theory or a similar theory. Describe how crime or delinquency is measured in the article and present whatever data is available on the distribution of the crime/delinquency measure(s).

Oct. 10 FALL BREAK (no class)

Oct. 17 Causes of Crime: Macro-Strain and Anomie Theory

Reread Cullen and Agnew, pages 171-185

RD; Blau et al. "Costs on Inequality...."

RD: Land et al., "Structural Covariates of Homicide Offending..."

RD: Messner, "Economic Discrimination....."

DR: Agnew, "A General Strain Theory of Community Differences in Crime Rates."

Cullen and Agnew, pages 198-207, 533-542

Assignment #4: Select indicators or measures for the independent variable(s) in your theory from the Youth and Deterrence Survey. Compute the frequencies for these measures, and provide me with the computer printout. **OR** Describe how the independent variable(s) in your theory was measured in the article you selected above, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this measure (s), and indicate how you would ideally measure your independent variable (s) – by listing or summarizing the questions you would ask or the questions used in another study.

Oct. 24 Causes of Crime: Social Learning Theory (Differential Association/Subcultural Deviance)

Cullen and Agnew, pages 125-134

Akers and Sellers, Chapter 5

RD; Akers et al., "Social Learning and Deviant Behavior: A Specific Test of a General Theory"

Cullen and Agnew, pages 155-169

Hawley and Messner, "The Southern Violence Construct..."

Assignment #5: Access the Youth and Deterrence Survey to conduct a preliminary test of your theory of delinquency. That is, determine whether your independent variable(s) is associated with your measure(s) of delinquency. I realize that students differ in their statistical background, and will take that into account in evaluating this assignment. Turn in your computer printout and a typed statement that discusses a) how you tested your theory and the results of your test; and b) if applicable, why your theory was not supported or received weak support. Methodologically inclined students with interesting results may want to turn this assignment into the final paper: elaborating the theory, reviewing the relevant literature, and expanding the data analysis. **OR** Describe whether your theory was supported in the study you selected. In particular, turn in a brief report that a) describes how the author(s) tested your theory and the results of this test; and b) if applicable, why your theory was not supported or received weak support.

Oct. 31 Causes of Crime: Social Control Theory/Self Control Theory



Cullen and Agnew, pp. 397-440

RD: Heimer and DeCoster, "The Gendering of Violent Delinquency."

RD: Steffensmeier and Allan, "Gender and Crime...."

Assignment #6: Those who did not give paper presentations last week do so today.

Dec. 5 Causes of Crime: The Impact of the Family, School, and Peer Group

Agnew, Chapters 14, 15, 16

RD: Thornberry et al., "The Role of Juvenile Gangs in Facilitating Delinquent Behavior"

Assignment #7: Final paper presentations.

Dec. 12 Causes of Crime: The Impact of Religion, Work, the Mass Media, Drugs, and Guns; Integrated Theories.

Agnew, Chapter 17

Cullen and Agnew, pp. 483-514

Agnew, Chapter 18

OPTIONAL: Akers and Sellers, Chapter 12

Assignment #7: Final paper presentations.

Dec. 19 **FINAL PAPER DUE**