Criminology: Theories, Methods And Concepts

Criminology includes a number of different disciplines and methods, drawing on techniques developed in both natural and social sciences. Criminology between the applied research and intuitive ways of thinking. However, different from other fields, criminology depends heavily on government cooperation at all levels. Agencies have to be able to provide data that is essential for the study of criminology. Case studies are also included within the field of criminology in hopes to determine the nature of crime, or why criminals choose to behavior the way the do, or more paradoxically, if they felt like they hand no control over their actions in the first place. Criminology also encompasses criminologists, criminalistics, and criminal justice. These extra professions help assisting in crime prevention and even the capture of an evading criminal.

History of Criminology

The history of humanity can be attributed to the history of criminology. As long as there has been people there has been crime. Criminology is the study of crime and the criminal element. Before any sort of society had evolved, besides a socialist barter system in ancient times, the response to crime was revenge. Revenge can take many forms so the punishment would not always fit the crime. Sometimes the revenge was so extreme that the original criminal would then see themselves as now the victim. During the Viking era, blood feuds would often erupt because of this criminal-victim cycle.

In Roman times, after laws and regulations had begun to take place, the concept of ‘an eye for an eye’ was established. In modern day, this is kept alive through the Old Testament of the Bible through the teachings of Jesus Christ. Crime was viewed as an offense to God and acts of revenge were therefore justified as long as they didn’t exceed the original committed crime. This line of thinking eventually helped establish Roman Law as one of the theories of criminology which in turn evolved hundreds of years later into Common Law and then stemmed further on from there.

Legally, the term crime refers to individual criminal actions and the societal response to those actions. The field of criminology examines the broader scope of crime and criminals. Why some people are more likely to engage in criminal behavior or why someone would be less likely to become a delinquent in society. Criminologist also study past crimes to determine if changes in laws can explain the differences in crime rates over time. They also will compare environmental factors on criminals and look for similarities and differences; all in order to prevent future criminal behavior.

Major Crime Theories

Of the major crime theories surrounding criminology, classical school, social structure, and social process are among the most notable. Classical school usually refers to the work suggested by philosophers Jeremy Bentham and Cesare Beccaria. The idea was that since man is a calculating animal, and people have free will in decision making, they should be punished after making choices that include breaking the law. Punishments should deter crimes as long as the punishment is proportional, fits the crime in terms of fairness, and is carried out

promptly.

The fairness of punishments had to be taken into consideration so that a person in political or financial power would receive the same punishment as a homeless or poor individual. Beccaria proposed these ideas coming from a time when authoritarian governments ruled the justice system, which was unjust. However, Beccaria also thought that for a given act of criminal activity, a particular punishment should be administered as established by law, regardless of circumstances. One example of classical school still existing today is the death penalty. To be clear, Beccaria apposed the death penalty saying that it shows the barbarity in men. But the United States has shown evidence that having the death penalty deters crime, although there is no correlation with homicide.

Todays punishment still reflects some of Classical school with first time offenders being ‘punished’ less than repeat offenders. Murderers often receive harsher sentences than that compared to a shoplifter, which some exceptions throughout history.

One of the sub categories of the Social Structure concepts is the Social Disorganization theory, which relates to ideas transcribed by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. Their work eventually became to be known as social ecology, a theory that describes an individuals surround organizations and communities, and linking those environmental factors into criminology. Many other theories have stemmed from this such as social pathology and criminology of place. Cultural transmission is another theory that relates crime as more of a tradition, as a language or an attitude, where responsibilities can be passed generation to generation.

Environmental criminology also evolved out of Social Disorganization. A person has a higher chance of being involved with a form of crime only because of the place where they were born and even raised. Children from South Central Compton may feel the need to carry a firearm for self protection, and can possibly be involved in gang and criminal activity because that is what everyone else in their surroundings are doing. This leads into another theory of the social structure of criminology; the broken window theory. First thought of by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, this theory is relates to criminology of place by means of more crimes were seen to be committed in neighborhoods whose appearances were lack luster. Broken windows could be seen as signs that a community is an easy target for theft. In 1993, New York City decided to put Wilson’s and Kelling’s writings to the test. The police started to focus on small crimes in small and bad neighborhoods. Crime rates dropped substantially. One anomaly from this can actually be seen in larger areas that try to fight crimes through jurisdictions. Taking away firearms, increasing police forces, and installing cameras through out cities, have an increase in crime despite their attempts to reduce it.

Finally, a third major crime theory is radical criminology, a term that became popular during the 20th century with Civil Rights and anti-war movements and was based on a variant of Marxism. Radical criminology is a theory in which society functions off of terms of the interests of the ruling class and not from society as a whole. There may be some potential for conflict coming from the lower classes, but it is diminished or neutralized by the ruling class. Radical criminologists typically reject the legal definitions of crime, centering on the fact of a government not protecting their rights and defending their concerns, therefore, law and order shall not apply to them at this point.

Nature of Crime

Four conditions must exist for an act or omission to be considered a crime: the act is considered wrong by society, the act causes harm to society in general or those in need of protection, the harm is serious, and the remedy must be handled by the criminal justice system. If these criteria are met, the act is considered a crime and criminologists start to ask why was this crime committed. Many biosocial theories have stemmed from what causes criminal behavior. Can criminal behavior be passed down from parents to children? Or, are kids trying to role model the actions of their criminal care takers.

Criminal activity can be traced to aggression that was learned at adolescence, possible even given at birth. The development of physical aggression in toddlers is strongly associated with genetic factors and to a lesser degree with the environment (Science Daily, 2014). Aggression has been shown to be passed down through genes, but the overall actions from aggression is shaped by the environment of the person. Increases or decreases in aggression during the adolescence and teenage years appear to be influenced more by environmental factors rather than genetics.

In an attempt to counteract any crimes being committed, criminologists will study biology and environments in order to determine any causes of crime, also hoping to find a deterrence and prevention to criminal activity. This is usually combatted with if not knowing something is a crime, is it still a crime?

Criminal Behavior Statistics

The Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics (UCR) is a program within the U.S. Department of Justice that collects data on offenses that are known to law enforcement. Part 1 offenses are divided into categories that are considered serious crimes which include murder, rape, assault, and larceny. The UCR is helpful to governments at different levels because it shows increases or decreases in crimes of their area. Criminologists compare area based numbers to national levels to determine if this is a local issue or if a larger problem is needing to be assessed.

For city government, this report can help determine budgets for the next year if it shows that an increase has occurred. Budget formulation for a larger police force and resource allocation for newer equipment are two examples. State governments address crime problems at various levels based on the findings of the UCR and similar reports. Also, legislators can draft anti/crime measures in order to deter these crimes from happening. City, state, and national news media can inform the public of high rises of specific criminal activity, both for informative purposes and to provide tips to avoid becoming a victim.

Public surveys can also be useful in gathering information related to crimes. Some anonymous surveys can be misleading however, if someone chooses to report false information on a crime that doesn’t exist. These surveys are usually more reliable for assessing trends but their limitations generally don’t procure statistics useful for local crime prevention. On a federal level, the National Crime Victimization Survey also helps in gathering statistical information. Even with these easily accessed sites, the United States has no infrastructure to monitor crime trends. If they did, information related to the crimes could be reported to various law enforcement agencies.

Controlling Crime

A subcategory of criminology is penology, which relates to the philosophy and practice of society in the attempt to subdue criminal activity. This also includes satifiying public opinion via an appropriate treatment regime for persons convicted of criminal offences and using punishment as a means of a detterent toward people committing crimes. In the recent years, home security systems have evolved as another way to deter criminals from committing a crime, specifically related to breaking and entering into a family home or business.

If a person chooses to ignore any possible warnings, and still carries out a crime, they may face a penalty or other means of enforcement that provides an incentive to obey laws, rules, and regulations. Common sanctions for misdemeanors and minor felonies are fines or incarcerations but may include capitol punishment and sometimes death depending on the state and the seriousness of the crime. A utilitarian approach to criminal sanctions is governed by a set of limiting principles (Beccaria 1980). According to utilitarianism criminal sanctions should not be used to penalize behavior that does not harm, the severity of the penalty should only slightly outweigh the benefit derived from the criminal behavior, and alternatives to punishment should be utilized when they prove to be as effective (Bentham 1995).

If a person is convicted of a crime, a court may choose multiple punishments as a deterrence of crime. If a person were to steal a horse in the State of Wyoming, they are charged for a felony punishable by imprisonment for no more than ten years or, a fine of less than ten thousand dollars, or both. This is still not a perfect system however. In the same state, a person who kills a horse is guilty of a misdemeanor and a fine of $750 or no more than 6 moths in prison. Also, animal abuse can be charged with a $5,000 fine. These forms of punishment mean that Wyoming hopes to suppress any animal endangerment by penalizing anyone who chooses to abuse or kill an animal.

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