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THE CAUSES OF DELINQUENCY

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Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent research indicates that a majority of people view crime as one of the most pressing of current social problems (Senna and Siegel 1995). Of particular concern is the increase in violence among young people. Valuable information is provided by the Uniform Crime Report and self-report studies. For example, we know that approximately half of all arrests involve persons under the age of twenty-five. While the overall arrest rate for juveniles has increased by 5.6 percent since 1982, arrests for violent crimes such as aggravated assault, robbery, rape and homicide have increased by 41 percent (Regoli and Hewitt 1994). Gender plays an important part. The overall arrest rate for males is four times greater than for females. Young men are eight times more likely to be arrested for violent crimes than are young women (Regoli and Hewitt 1994).

Given the significant social concern surrounding the problem of juvenile delinquency, it is natural and reasonable for policy makers, academics and citizens to ask what might cause delinquency. If the factors that lead to the onset, increase or continuation of delinquent behavior could be successfully identified, then we would have a clearer idea of what might be done to prevent delinquency. In addition, we might also gain a better sense of the limits to our ability to reduce delinquency through purposeful intervention.

Asking what causes delinquency is much easier than providing the answer. For example, although we know that the highest rates of delinquency behavior are found among males aged 15 to 17, we do not know why that group is the most delinquent. Gender and age are relatively good predictors of delinquent behavior, but they are not causes of delinquency, in any meaningful sense of the word; and for that reason, they do not give any clear indication of what we might do to prevent delinquency. We cannot, for example, remove all males aged 15 to 17 from society.

Many people have their particular ideas about factors that might cause delinquency, and researchers have also unearthed many possibilities. For example, some think that poverty is the cause of delinquency, others that families are the problem, still others that unsuitable friendships are a major contributor. While some support can be found for each of these positions, we are not always much closer to the goal of understanding juvenile delinquency. For example, to argue that unstable or conflictive families are associated with delinquency still leaves many questions unanswered. How does family instability or conflict affect juveniles? Precisely when do instability and conflict lead to delinquent behavior? Are instability and conflict associated with specific kinds of delinquent behavior? Thus, naming the factors that are thought to be associated with delinquency does not necessarily help us to design prevention or intervention programs that have some chance of being successful.

One of the main concerns of criminologists is to address the problem of causality, and even a brief review of criminological research shows that, as with all things social, establishing causal pathways is a complicated process. Ethical concerns involved in the study of human beings often render the use of controlled experimental conditions, impossibility in the study of crime. The

result is that isolation of pertinent variables can often be difficult. In addition, definition of the question to be answered is often more complicated than it appears at first glance. Although related, crime and criminality are different concepts. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) point out that different variables may be involved in trying to answer the question of what causes crime versus what causes criminality. The latter involves an investigation of the factors that make one person more likely to commit crime than another. The answer to the former is based on variables, such as situational motivation and opportunity (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993, Felson 1994).

Nevertheless, criminologists have made some headway in identifying different types of cause, and causal process, that might lead to delinquent behavior. The main types of cause are often expressed in more abstract terms than those usually employed by policy makers or citizens. However, those causes are frequently the implicit or explicit focus of delinquency prevention or intervention programs. Some causes refer to individual characteristics, others to the socialization process, and still others to social system characteristics. Each type of cause is addressed by one or more theories that link, with varying degrees of precision, the cause to criminal behavior.

Figure 1 shows the main kinds of cause studied by criminologists, and the theories that propose the links between each cause and delinquent behavior. The first part of this paper describes these causes, as articulated in the corresponding theory. The second offers some ideas on the links between theory and policy, and develops a brief case study focusing on the most recent initiative in New Mexico's juvenile justice policy: "Restoring Justice."

Figure 1: Causes and Theories of Delinquency	
Causes	**Theories**

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES
    Physiological problems
    Personality problems
	INDIVIDUAL THEORIES
	Biological theories
	Psychological/Psychoanalytic theories

SOCIALIZATION PROBLEMS
    Inappropriate values
 	
    Weak links to conventional society
    Negative/deviant self-images
	PROCESS THEORIES
	
	Differential Association, Differential Reinforcement, Techniques of Neutralization
	Social Control Theory
	Symbolic Interaction/Labeling

SOCIETAL PROBLEMS
  Poor social/community integration
  Lack of opportunities for legitimate advancement
  Plural society, different values
  Opportunities for crime, lack of surveillance, etc.
  Lack of accountability
	STRUCTURAL THEORIES
	    Social Disorganization theory
	    Anomie, Strain theories
	
	    Cultural theory
	    Routine Activity theory
	Deterrence theory

II THE CAUSES OF DELINQUENCY

INDIVIDUAL PROBLEMS

Early biological theories of crime were based on the premise that those who engage in criminal behavior possess anomalies in their physical constitution that make them different from the population of non-offenders. The theories focused on the individual as the unit of analysis. **The** role of social variables was considered to be minimal (Akers 1994).

These theories, which became popular toward the end of the nineteenth century, were based on positivism, i.e. the use of scientific method and empirical analysis to study behavior. One of the earliest of the theorists was Cesare Lombroso. In 1876, Lombroso published a work entitled *The Criminal Man,* which was to influence subsequent biological theories. Lombroso' s work included the observation of the physical characteristics of two groups of Italian men. A group of prisoners was compared to a group of soldiers. From his observations, Lombroso concluded that certain physical traits could be used to identify persons with an innate predisposition to engage in criminal activity. These were the "born criminals." Lombroso considered them to be throwbacks to a more primitive stage of human evolution. As such, these persons were unsuited to life in modem society (Akers 1994, Siegel 1992).

Although Lombroso and others such as Goring and Hooten attempted to employ scientific method in the study of crime, it is generally recognized that the early studies were plagued by methodological problems. Control groups were not used, so comparison of the experimental groups with the general population was impossible. In addition, modem research has shown that many traits that were thought by the early researchers to be genetically based, could actually be caused by variables in the physical and social environment of the subjects. A notable weak point of the early theories was their neglect of those factors (Akers 1994, Siegel 1992).

The Modern Biological Theories

By the early part of the twentieth century biological explanations of crime fell out of favor, and social factors began to be considered as important variables in the etiology of crime. The modem view is less deterministic than the early biological perspective. Although many theorists still place special emphasis on biology, social environment and learning are considered to be important contributing factors. Since physical make-up is not solely responsible for behavior, more tools are available to combat delinquency and crime.

Combinations of drug treatment, behavior modification, tutoring and family counseling are often used with children who have biologically based learning and attention deficit disorders. The aim is to reduce the risk of delinquency by giving the child ways to cope with, or overcome problems caused by physiology.

Psychological Theories of Crime

Psychological theories of crime also focus on the individual as the unit of analysis. Specifically, the mental processes of the individual are examined for anomalies that might contribute to criminal behavior. As with the biological theories, direct causal pathways have not been established (Akers 1994, Hagan 1990, Siegel 1992). Two examples of psychological theory are outlined below.

The Psychoanalytic Perspective

Freudian psychoanalysis focus on problems or abnormalities that may have affected emotional development in early childhood. Criminal behavior is seen as a symptom of conflict that is taking place within the psyche of the offender. For example, according to psychoanalyst August Aichom (1935), societal stress may be damaging, but it cannot result in criminal activity unless the individual possesses the psychological predisposition to engage in the behavior. Those with the predisposition are "latent delinquents." They tend to: 1) seek immediate gratification, 2) consider satisfaction of their personal needs more important than relating to others, and 3) satisfy instinctive urges without considering the social implications of their actions (Siegel 1992). Advocates of the psychoanalytic perspective view offenders as individuals with a mental disorder, who are in need of treatment. Crime is considered a symptom of the underlying disorder.

Problems

The nature of psychoanalysis makes the gathering of empirical evidence difficult. Information collected is usually from case studies. Often, those recommended for psychoanalysis have committed the most serious offenses, and are not representative of the general population of offenders. In addition, the concepts of the psyche and the unconscious cannot be tested objectively. Normal and abnormal functioning can only be assessed through the patient's psychiatrist, leaving much leeway for variations both in the interpretation of the problem and the results. At present time there is no way to adequately test results of treatment programs based on psychoanalytic principles (Akers 1994).

Personality Theory

In personality theory, the individual is still the unit of analysis, but the focus moves from the unconscious to the offender's personality as the origin of criminal behavior (Akers 1994, Siegel 1992, Sykes and Cullen 1992). According to the theory, criminals have personalities that are different from those found in the population of law-abiding persons (Akers 1994). Personality traits have been empirically measured using tests such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI). Mixed results have been obtained. No solid link has been established between personality traits and criminal behavior (Siegel 1992).

SOCIALIZATION PROBLEMS

Inappropriate Values

According to social learning theorists, "...crime is a product of learning the norms, values and behaviors associated with criminal activity" (Siegel 1992 p. 225). Three theories are used to illustrate the perspective. They are: 1) differential association, 2) differential reinforcement, and 3) neutralization theory.

Differential Association

Differential association theory is the work of twentieth century criminologist Edwin H. Sutherland. The theory contains nine propositions, however the sixth proposition embodies the essence of the theory. It states that a person is likely to engage in crime when he or she has learned more attitudes that are favorable to violation of the law, than attitudes that are unfavorable to it. Learning takes place in the course of social interaction, and criminal behavior is learned in the same manner as any other social behavior. Contacts made early in life, those that are intimate, frequent and lasting tend to have more impact than those that are casual and/or short term. A criminal career is likely to develop when a child is exposed, through close social interaction, to an abundance of attitudes favorable to crime and fewer conventional attitudes and behaviors (Akers 1994, Siegel 1992).

Differential Reinforcement Theory

Ronald Akers (1977) added to the theory of differential association. He incorporated elements of behavioristic psychology in order to explain how learning takes place. His emphasis is on operant conditioning. People learn social behavior: 1) through the modeling of others, and 2) through the receipt of rewards or the avoidance of punishment. (Akers 1994, Jeffery 1990, Siege] 1992).

Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory is the work of Sykes and Matza (1957). It differs from the social learning theories of Sutherland and Akers on a major point. According to Sutherland and Akers, delinquents and criminals have learned a different value system that encourages the commission of crime. Sykes and Matza argue, instead, that criminals and delinquents often hold conventional values and attitudes. However, they have learned certain techniques that allow them to neutralize those values and beliefs temporarily, so that they may engage in criminal activity. They do so through denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. The techniques provide offenders with excuses for their behavior, while allowing them to espouse conventional attitudes the remainder of the time (Matza 1964, Sykes and Matza 1957)

Weak Links to Conventional Society

The basic premise of control theories is that all people are alike in their susceptibility to commit crime.

Control theorists do not seek to know why certain individuals commit crime. They want to know what keeps the rest of society's members from engaging in criminal activity. According to control and social bonding theorists, the answer lies in the fact that"... people's behavior, including their criminal activity, is controlled by their attachment and commitment to conventional institutions, individuals and processes. If that commitment is absent, they are free to violate the law and engage in deviant behavior..." (Siegel 1992 p. 232).

Theorists have attempted to describe the types of control that are instrumental in the modification of deviant behavior. According to Reiss (1951), behavior is controlled by both internal or personal controls, and external controls. The external controls are of two types. Formal control, found in the legal system, and informal control, exercised by family, teachers and peers.

Nye (1958) elaborated on the idea by distinguishing three types of informal control that serve to prevent criminality and delinquency. They are: 1) direct control, which is exercised by parents, 2) indirect control, which originates with the desire of the child to avoid causing pain and disappointment to those with whom he/she has a close relationship, and 3) internal control, or the sense of guilt that prevents the person from engaging in criminal or delinquent acts. Hirschi (1969) outlined four types of bonding that serve to produce strong social ties and encourage conformity. They are attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. The four elements of bonding are separate, but interrelated. If one weakens, others are likely to become weak also.

a) Attachment

Attachment refers to the emotional bond between juveniles and others. According to Hirschi, attachments to primary agents of socialization (parents, teachers, peers and school) can be used to predict delinquency. Children who have strong emotional ties to parents are more likely to adopt their parents' value system and less likely to do anything to jeopardize the relationship.

Hirschi also believes that the level of attachment to teachers and school is a determining factor in school achievement. He uses it to explain why juveniles with lower than average I.Q. scores are more likely to engage in delinquency. Intelligence level is not a direct cause of the behavior. School attachment is an important intervening variable. Children who do poorly in school are less likely to form an attachment to school or teachers. Less attachment means they are less likely to adopt institutional rules and the conventional value system espoused there.

b) Commitment

Variables related to commitment are: motivation, ambition, achievement and success. When time and energy are spent in pursuit of a conventional goal, young persons are less likely to engage in behavior that will pose a risk to their investment.

c) Involvement

Involvement in law-abiding activity leaves little time for delinquency. Policy based on this idea would support sports and other types of after-school programs.

d) Belief

According to Hirschi, juveniles accept conventional values to differing degrees. When acceptance is weak, delinquency is more likely to occur.

Negative/Deviant Self Images

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

According to symbolic interactionist theory, the way in which humans define themselves, including the formation of identity, self-concept, values and attitudes, all develop and change in the process of social interaction. Face to face interactions involving the use of language and gestures are of great importance. Social reality is created by the participants.

An analysis of gang violence can be used to illustrate the symbolic interactionist perspective. Gang members work at creating the social image they desire. Physical appearance, language and posture are all carefully cultivated to create the desired impression. According to Katz (1988) gang violence erupts when the social image is challenged.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory emerged out of the symbolic interactionist school, during the 1950's and 1960's. According to Becker (1963), it is not the fact that an act is officially recorded as criminal or deviant that matters. It is societal reaction that has causal significance. When society stigmatizes a person with the label of "delinquent" or "criminal," the likelihood is increased that the labeled person will act accordingly (Akers 1994, Jeffery 1990). In essence, labeling theorists believe that contact with the criminal justice system has unintended effects. Instead of deterring the offender from further criminal activity, it causes it. According to Lemert (1951), we all participate, occasionally, in acts that are defined as deviant. This is especially true of adolescents. If the acts are relatively infrequent, not very visible, or unlikely to invoke a serious reaction, the juvenile engaging in the activity is more likely to be able to rationalize it as part of a socially acceptable identity. If the person's actions are serious and visible enough to attract attention and disapproval. then maintenance of former images of the self and attendant roles will become increasingly more difficult. A formal court record confirms the youth's deviant status, and segregates the person from the community. It also places the juvenile in increased contact and at increased risk for identification with others who have also been labeled deviant.

Labeling theory led to many policy changes in the U.S. during the 1970's. Diversion programs are

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Labeling theory led to many policy changes in the U.S. during the 1970's. Diversion programs are based on the labeling perspective.

The theory has been criticized for its lack of attention to other pertinent variables, including those that may have played a causal role in the commission of delinquent acts that occurred prior to official processing (Akers 1994, Regoli and Hewitt 1994).

SOCIETAL   PROBLEMS

Social Disorganization

According to Akers (1994 p. 141), social disorganization and anomie theories have a common theme, i.e. "...the proposition that social order, stability and integration are conducive to conformity, while disorder and mat integration are conducive to crime and deviance." An organized system has (Akers 1994):

        1) internal consensus on its norms and values
        2) strong cohesion among its members
        3) orderly social interaction

In an anomie society there is:
        1) Disruption in social cohesion
        2) a breakdown in social control
        3) mal-alignment among society's elements

Poor Social/Community Integration

Social disorganization theory was developed by Shaw and McKay in the 1920's and 1930's. The researchers examined patterns in the distribution of juvenile delinquency in urban Chicago. High rates were found in the "transition zone," an area which was in the process of changing from a residential to a commercial zone. It was characterized by high numbers of recently arrived, foreign-born citizens, with low incomes and little education. Its residents lived in poor housing, surrounded by physical decay (Akers 1994, Hagan 1990, Siegel 1992).

Some support has been found for the hypothesis that crime is based more in social disorganization and pathological environment than in the abnormality of individuals. Official measures of crime and delinquency continue to show extremely high rates in the areas with social disorganization. The high rates continue over time, despite changes in the racial and ethnic make-up of the residents (Akers 1994, Hagan 1990, Siegel 1992).

<u>Lack of Opportunities for Legitimate Advancement</u>

<u>Merton</u>

According to Merton (1957), anomie or strain results when members of society lack access to this legitimate means to achieve culturally defined goals. Merton identified five modes of adaptation used to cope with the situation. Two of the modes, innovation and retreatism, may be used to analyze deviance and/or criminality.

       1) <u>Innovation</u>

Innovators are committed to achieving culturally defined goals. When legitimate means are unavailable these persons use illegal means to attain their goals.

       2) <u>Retreatism</u>

Persons who use this mode of adaptation are often referred to as social dropouts. They accept neither the goals, nor the means of mainstream society. Many members of the population of drug addicts, psychotics, alcoholics and the homeless might use retreatism as a means of coping with strain.

Cloward and Ohlin

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) agree with Merton on the general effects of strain. However, they propose that opportunity is not equally available to all those who might wish to engage in illegal activity. The orientation of gangs in a particular area is based on available opportunities.

       1) <u>Criminal gangs</u>

These gangs exist in areas where the population is relatively stable. Persons of different age levels belong to the same gang. Young members are instructed on the ways to be successful in criminal endeavors.

       2) Conflict gangs

Conflict gangs develop in disorganized areas with transient populations. Adult role models are rare. Opportunity for any type of economic success is blocked. Crime is generally unorganized and unprofitable. Violence against rival gangs becomes the means for developing a positive self-image.

       3) <u>Retreatist gangs</u>

       Members try to remain detached and on the fringes of society. Members are often substance abusers. Crime is committed to support the habit. According to Cloward and Ohlin (1960), they often engage in prostitution, pimping, conning, selling drugs and petty theft. Self-image is based on peer approval.

Plural Society, Different Values

<u>Cultural Deviance Theory</u>

According to cultural deviance theory (Sellin 1938), laws express the norms of the dominant culture. Those laws often conflict with the norms of groups that exist within the society.

Behavior in accordance with the norms of the smaller group may constitute criminal behavior according to the laws of the larger society. Sellin (1938) cited the case of a Sicilian father who killed the seducer of his young daughter. His behavior would have been appropriate in his native country, but was considered criminal in the United States.

The Deviant Subculture

According to Cohen (1955), those who are frustrated with their inability to achieve within the dictates of the mainstream often form their own subculture. The value system of these delinquent subcultures is simply a reversal of the dominant value system. For example, if the use of certain drugs is prohibited by law, then it is condoned or encouraged by the subculture.

> *Assessment*
> Cultural theorists have been criticized on the grounds that their analysis is too simplistic. In a pluralistic society, most people are influenced by the conduct norms of more than one group or culture (Siegel 1992).

Opportunities for Crime

Routine activity theory focuses on the changes in society that lead to more crime producing situations. Crime is more likely to occur when three ingredients come together: 1) the presence oj a potential offender, 2) a vulnerable target, and 3) the absence of a suitable guardian (Cohen and Felson 1979). In his book *Crime and Everyday Life,* Marcus Felson describes how the changes in social structure can affect crime rates. As society moves from small village to sprawling urban metropolis, each of the three risk factors is increased. Fewer adults are home during the day. More children and properties are left unattended. We have more portable goods, which makes theft easier, and we are less likely to be acquainted with our neighbors. According to Felson (1994), the answer to the crime problem will not be found in formal methods of control. Instead, routine activities theorists place responsibility on potential victims. This is not a "blame the victim" approach, but it does advocate a proactive method of dealing with crime, which includes increased guardianship and target hardening. Neighborhood watch programs and graffiti removal crews are examples of programs based on routine activities theory.

Lack of Accountability

Classical /deterrence theory originated in eighteenth century Europe with the writings of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. The basic premises of the theory are: l) human beings are rational and have free will; 2) human beings are governed by the pleasure/pain principle. The decision-making process is used to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The classical theorists believed that punishment must be just severe enough to outweigh any pleasure to be gained from the commission of the illegal act. In order to facilitate the connection of the punishment with the crime- it must also be applied with swiftness and certainty. When so applied. rational human beings should be deterred from committing crime (Akers 1994, Hagan 1990, Jeffery 1990, Siegel 1992, Sykes and Cullen 1990).

Policy Implications

Efforts to put the basic principles of deterrence theory into practice have often resulted in a call for :1) an increase in the number of patrol officers, 2) determinate sentencing, and 3) more severe penalties.

1) Increased Police Patrol

Some measure of success has been achieved through the use of police crackdowns on crime in targeted areas. However, according to Senna and Siegel (1995) the effects can be deceptive. Crime is often displaced to adjacent areas. Rates rise again when police patrol returns to normal.

Results of a study of the Kansas City Police Department, conducted in the early 1970's, showed that doubling and even tripling the number of officers on patrol did not significantly effect the crime rate. The logic of the deterrence model may not be at fault in this case. Based on data from Los Angeles County, Felson (1994) points out that the average patrol officer is responsible for protecting approximately 3,000 locations, including residences, schools and businesses. Each location receives approximately 29 seconds of attention each day. "Doubling the number of police in a U.S. metropolis is like doubling a drop in a bucket..." (Felson 1994 p.l 1).

2) Determinate Sentencing

Classical theorists believed that in order to be effective, penalties for criminal behavior must be set ahead of time, allowing the offender the opportunity to calculate costs and benefits in a rational manner. Judges were to have no discretion. Then- function was to enforce penalties that were predetermined by the legislative body. No leeway was allowed for first offenders, minors, or those with diminished mental capacity.

The basic principles of the classical school were put into practice in the French code of 1791. Cries of injustice soon followed, when the same penalties were applied to all persons convicted of crime, including children and others who were not fully able to comprehend the effects of their actions. The code was amended in the early part of the nineteenth century, to permit the use of judicial discretion based on age, mental state and other special circumstances (Void and Bernard 1986). This policy has recently been in vogue in the United States.

3) Stiffer Penalties

The classical/deterrence model advocates that punishment be just severe enough to deter commission of the act. If punishment is too severe, offenders might be encouraged to commit additional crimes in order avoid getting caught. In practice, there is no sure way to determine the correct level of severity needed to act as a deterrent. Research suggests that most persons do not make decisions based on a purely rational calculation of costs and benefits (Akers 1994, Simon 1977). Tunnell (1990) found that risk evaluation is rarely engaged in by potential offenders. Emotions such as shame, humiliation and rage can affect the judgment of the offender. In the case of certain types of homicide, the act may seem perfectly logical to the assailant, within the context of the situation (Kate 1988). The purely rational evaluation of consequences, as defined by the classical model, appears to be quite rare.

INTEGRATED THEORIES

The theories reviewed in previous sections each concentrate on different dimensions of the causes of delinquency. However, it is also possible to focus simultaneously on several causal dimensions. Recent developments in criminology have included attempts at theory integration. The integrated theories share the basic assumption that delinquent and criminal behaviors are the result of complex interactions among variables that occur at both the process and structural levels.

Elliott and Ageton

According to Elliott and Ageton (1985), living in a socially disorganized environment decreases the likelihood of achieving success through conventional means. The situation results in: 1) strain and alienation from mainstream society, and 2) a weakening of bonds with conventional institutions, such as family and school. Persons who reject the values of the dominant culture, tend to replace them with those of a deviant subculture. Patterns of delinquent behavior are learned and/or reinforced by peers within the subculture.

Glazer

Glazer combined elements of classical/deterrence theory with basic principles of control and social learning theories. According to Glazer (1978) the decision to commit crime is the result of: 1) a cost /benefit analysis, 2) a weakening of the bonds with conventional institutions, and 3) previous learning experiences.

Wies

According to Weis (1981), a comprehensive theory of delinquency must include variables that affect placement within the social structure (gender, race, socioeconomic status), as well as those which affect the process of socialization. Recent research seems to offer support. McCleod and Shanahan (1993) found that poverty is associated with the use of harsh and inconsistent disciplinary practices. Parental rejection, inconsistency and harshness are associated with a variety of symptoms in children, including the development of conduct problems (Wicks-Nelson and Israel 1991).

Figure 2 shows a possible model for integrating; different causes delinquency.

III. USING THEORY TO THINK ABOUT POLICY [Some notes]

Criminologists appear to be markedly unhelpful to policy makers. They produce a plethora of theories and will then tell you that all are possible explanations and none is the definitive explanation. But it is the job of criminologists to think about the challenges of advancing our knowledge and understanding of delinquency, and this is - as they will often point out - a tough assignment.

Policy makers, on the other hand, must do something about today's problems. They cannot wait for the definitive answer, especially if, as most philosophers argue, definitive answers can never be found. So should policy makers dismiss theories as fruitless intellectual exercises and plough on regardless? The answer is no.

Any plan or policy that seeks to produce changes in a desired direction is based explicitly or implicitly on a theory. For example, a program to try and reduce delinquent behavior by strengthening the links between juveniles and their families is based on the hypothesis that weak bonds between adolescents and their parents is part of the cause of delinquent behavior. Policy makers may not base their actions on a formal theory of delinquent behavior, but on a "causal story," that is, an informal exposition of causal factors. Causal stories often translate back into more formal theories.

Policies and programs therefore represent theories in action (sometimes several theories at once). Explicit recognition of this is advantageous for two reasons: a) By attempting to articulate the theoretical underpinnings of any program, policy makers can then see how their policy fits in with other ideas about what causes delinquency and what might prevent it. In this sense, theories serve as an organizing framework for understanding and comparing policies.

b) Policy makers are encouraged to seek rigorous evaluations of their programs, because the results of a program represent (broadly) a test of the theoretical perspective that underlies the program.

Thus, policy makers should find that explicit reference to the theoretical ideas articulated by criminologists helps to clarify and place in perspective their own programs.

Empirical studies may be of assistance in establishing the link between theory and policy. Frequently, theoretical concepts seem too vague to be of use to policy-makers. Defining pertinent variables within the context of everyday life is often of value. For example, for those who believe that school commitment and involvement are important factors for reducing delinquency and crime, the following study may be of interest. McNeal (1995) measured high school students' level of involvement with, and commitment to their school, by using the drop-out rate. Four common after-school activities were evaluated for their impact. They were: 1) membership in an academic club, 2) membership in a vocational club, 3) participation in sports, and 4) participation in fine arts activities. Results of the study indicate that membership in academic and vocational clubs had no significant effect. Participation in fine arts had a marginal effect (probability of dropping-out was reduced by 15%). Participation in sports had the greatest impact(probability of dropping-out was reduced by 40%). McNeal (1995) points out that the impact of sports programs may stem from the fact that they are more consistently available than other types of programs. The variables in McNeal's study can be directly linked to the social control, or social bonding, theory outlined in Section II. The theory would predict that those with lower involvement in, or commitment to, school activities will have higher rates of delinquency.

Some guidelines for linking theory and policy might be as follows:

   a) For any prevention or intervention plan currently operating, or being proposed, identify the theory that is embedded within it. Then think about what is known about that theory (how much evidence is there to support it?) and how it relates to other theoretical perspectives.

   b) Recognize that the causation of delinquency has many dimensions (e.g., personal, process, and social structural factors that produce the motivation to commit crime; opportunities for crime). If a policy only focuses on one dimension, it is not realistic to expect radical changes in delinquency rates. Focusing on several dimensions may produce greater change (at different rates for different dimensions).

   c) Plan to have some rigorous evaluations of the outcome of existing/proposed programs. This will help to determine if the underlying theoretical perspective has any validity.

As an example of some of the contributions that theory can provide for policy, in the following section we apply this perspective to the most recent policy statement on juvenile justice in New Mexico: "Restoring Justice."

"RESTORING JUSTICE" AND THE CAUSES OF DELINQUENCY

1.   In September 1995, the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYPD) announced a plan (""Restoring Justice"[1]) to restructure the juvenile justice system, paying particular attention to increasing the options for juvenile custody (see Appendix 1). The plan proposes a continuum of services from prevention/early intervention to secure facilities.

2.   "Restoring Justice" is a relatively short statement, based on substantial internal discussion at CYFD, designed to communicate the new policy initiative to legislators and other interested parties. Therefore, "Restoring Justice" should not be judged as a comprehensive statement of CYFD policy, and its use here is merely for the purpose of illustrating the ideas outlined in the previous section.

How important is the question of the causes of delinquency?

1.   "Restoring Justice" makes no direct statement about the causes of delinquency. Indeed, at one point the document hints at the difficulty of identifying the causes of delinquency: "Kids are complicated. The majority of offenders... have significant...problems.... [T]hose problems may not directly cause delinquency..." (p. 5).

1.   "Restoring Justice" enunciates four principles: accountability; restitution; rehabilitation and community involvement. An additional consideration, mentioned at several points in the plan, is public safety: the need to isolate potentially dangerous juvenile offenders from the community. Public safety considerations do nor usually imply the need to address the causes of delinquency, only to minimize its effects. By contrast, and depending on how they are defined, accountability, restitution, rehabilitation and community involvement could all be considered as reflecting implicit perspectives on the causes of crime.

> For example, if accountability and restitution translate into a certain and swift response to juvenile offenders, the underlying perspective on the causes of delinquency appears to be deterrence theory (i.e., when sufficiently severe punishments are applied with swiftness and certainty, rational individuals should be deterred from committing crime).

Depending on its specific content, rehabilitation appears to derive from one or more individual or social process theories concerning the causes of delinquency. Likewise, community involvement may be an implicit attempt to apply principles of differential association or control theory.

3. Thus, "Restoring Justice" appears to combine a secondary concern for public safety with a primary concern for reducing or eliminating delinquent behavior. That primary concern implicitly attributes great importance to the causes of delinquency.

4. **What kinds of causes of delinquency?**

1.   As noted, "Restoring Justice" says little directly about the causes of delinquency. The underlying perspective on the causes of delinquency must be identified by examining proposed policies. Although policies do not translate unequivocally back into a given perspective on the causes of delinquency, some assessment of the underlying perspective can be made.

2. Core Services:
   Core services support each program in the policy's proposed continuum of prevention and intervention options. The services comprise a wide variety of intervention strategies, which are not presented as attempts to attack directly the causes of delinquency. However, these services can be related to existing perspectives on the causes of delinquency:
   A. Counseling and therapy address *psychological* causes of delinquency.
   B. Client monitoring, community involvement, family services address weak *social bonds.*
   C. Behavior modification and management, pro-social skills and life skills address *personality* problems.
   D. Education and vocational intervention, job placement and training, support services address *social strain and anomie.*
   E. Community service, victim mediation and restitution address the lack of accountability *(deterrence)* for delinquency
   F. Mentorship addresses the lack of contact *(differential association)* with values favorable to upholding the law.

5. Prevention and Early Intervention:

Prevention and early intervention programs focus on strengthening the juvenile's *bonds* with the community. They also involve a *deterrent* component by requiring juveniles to make restitution to the victim and/or the community.

4. Community Based Supervision:

Apart from treatment provided by core services, community based supervision programs emphasize control and monitoring (presumably a *deterrent* to delinquency). Family preservation attempts to strengthen juveniles" *bonds* with their families.

5. Alternative Facilities:

The boot camp would focus on building self-discipline, self-respect, respect for authority and responsibility, presumably seeking to modify the *delinquent 's personality* while strengthening the *bonds* to conventional society. By making the delinquent accountable, the boot camp would provide some *deterrent* to delinquent behavior.

Work camps focus on occupational skills, to increase access to employment and reduce *social strain.* Additional programs aim to reduce *personality* problems.

Transitional living programs nurture *bonds* with society and facilitate access to education and employment in an attempt to reduce *social strain.*

6. Secure Facilities:

Secure facilities would provide counseling programs (presumably for *psychological* or *personality* problems), educational programs (to reduce *social strain)* and other rehabilitation services.

Some Discussion Questions

1. Do the programs included in "Restoring Justice" have the potential theoretical underpinnings outlined in the previous section? Would the professionals who designed 01 work in these programs concur with our analysis? If not, what alternative versions would they offer of the causal stories implicit in these programs?

2. "Restoring Justice" implicitly addresses a variety of possible causes of delinquency. Was this a conscious decision, or the cumulative result of the internal discussions regarding the proposal? Does CYFD wish to identify a predominant perspective on the causes of delinquency that would provide the foundation for its programs? If so, what would that perspective be?

3. Systematic evaluation of program outcomes can help to assess the validity of the theory underlying a program. Which programs would CYFD like to evaluate in this way?

4. Different components in the proposed continuum of services focus on somewhat different possible causes of delinquency. Should all components focus on the same causes? If so, why? If not, why not?

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APPENDIX 1

**EXTRACT FROM
"RESTORING JUSTICE"**

(SEPTEMBER, 1995)