

We know that most serious delinquents grow up in deteriorated parts of town, and lack the social support and economic resources familiar to more affluent members of society. Latino and African-American children are more than twice as likely to be poor as Asian and white children. It is also apparent that social relationships with families, peers, schools, jobs, criminal justice agencies and the like may play an important role in shaping behavioral choices. As a result, many delinquency theorists believe that elements of social life are responsible for kids getting involved in anti-social behaviors. Social disorganization theory focuses on the conditions within the urban environment that affect delinquency rates, such as socioeconomic conditions. Poverty undermines the basic stabilizing forces of the community—family, school, peers, and neighbors—rendering them weakened, attenuated, and ineffective. As a result, the ability of the community to control its inhabitants—to assert informal social control—is damaged and frayed.

Gangs flourish in deteriorated neighborhoods with high levels of poverty, lack of investment, high unemployment rates, and population turnover. In contrast, cohesive communities develop collective efficacy: mutual trust, a willingness to intervene in the supervision of children, and the maintenance of public order.

Another approach rests on the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who coined the term *anomie* to describe a society in which rules of behavior have broken down during periods of rapid social change or social crisis. From this origin, strain theory emerged. Sociologist Robert Agnew's general strain theory explains why individuals, who feel stress and strain, are more likely to engage in delinquent acts. Delinquency is the direct result of negative affective states—the anger, frustration, and adverse emotions that kids feel in the wake of negative and destructive social relationships. Because their lifestyle is draining, frustrating, and dispiriting, members of the lower class create an independent subculture with its own set of rules and values. Because social conditions make them incapable of achieving success legitimately, lower-class youths experience a form of culture conflict.

Some social theorists believe that delinquency is a function of socialization; the interactions people have with various organizations, institutions, and processes of society. If these relationships are positive and supportive, kids can succeed within the rules of society; if these relationships are dysfunctional and destructive, conventional success may be impossible, and delinquent solutions may become a feasible alternative.

Social learning theories suggest that delinquency is learned in a process that is similar to learning any other human behavior. One of the most prominent social learning theories is Edwin H. Sutherland's differential association theory, which asserts that criminal behavior is learned primarily within interpersonal groups, and youths will become delinquent if, within their group, favor is placed on violating the law as opposed to obeying the law. In contrast, social control theories maintain that all people have the potential to violate the law and that modern society presents many opportunities for illegal activity. Travis Hirschi links the onset of delinquency to the weakening of the ties that bind people to society.

Other experts focus on the process of becoming stigmatized or labeled, by agents of social control, which creates and sustains delinquent careers. Kids whose deviant behavior is detected and punished will develop negative labels that can follow them throughout life. The labeling process transforms the youngsters' identity. Labels and stigma lock offenders forever into a delinquent way of life.

Another social view considers the effect of the capitalist economic system on behavior. Society is set up to favor a few wealthy people, over the great majority, who have little hope of advancement. Delinquency is a result of the inequities built into contemporary society.