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 bagnew@emory.edu, so my userid is bagnew). 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:


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, “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....”
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.


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.

Cullen and Agnew, pages 219-226
Akers and Sellers, Chapter 6
Cullen and Agnew, pages 231-252, 470-482
RD: Wright et al., “Low Self-Control, Social Bonds, and Crime....”
Agnew, Chapter 8

Nov. 7       M IDTERM

Nov. 14      Causes of Crime: Social Disorganization Theory

Cullen and Agnew, pages 95-123
Akers and Sellers, Pp. 159-163.
RD: Sampson and Groves, “Community Structure and Crime....”
RD: Sampson et al., “Neighborhoods and Violent Crime....”
Anderson, "The Northton Community"
Agnew, pp. 202-212

BEGIN SERIOUS WORK ON YOUR FINAL PAPER

Nov. 21      Causes of Crime: Modern Deterrence, Rational Choice, Routine Activities, and
Labeling Theories

Cullen and Agnew, pages 263-293
Akers and Sellers, Chapter 2
Cullen and Agnew, pages 295-303, 316-332
Akers and Sellers, Chapter 7
Agnew, Chapter 9

Assignment #6. One page paper proposals are due today. Part of the class will be
asked to give a 15 minute presentation on their final paper. You may employ
anyone of several models for your presentation. One common model, suitable for
research papers, is as follows: a) list the central question or questions you will try
to answer in your paper (statement of the problem), b) briefly describe previous
answers to this question (review of the literature), c) describe your tentative
answer to this question (hypothesis or theory), and d) describe how you will go
about trying to test your answer (data and methods). We will spend several
minutes providing you with feedback on your presentation, which will hopefully
improve the quality of your final paper.

Nov. 28      Feminist Theories
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.

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