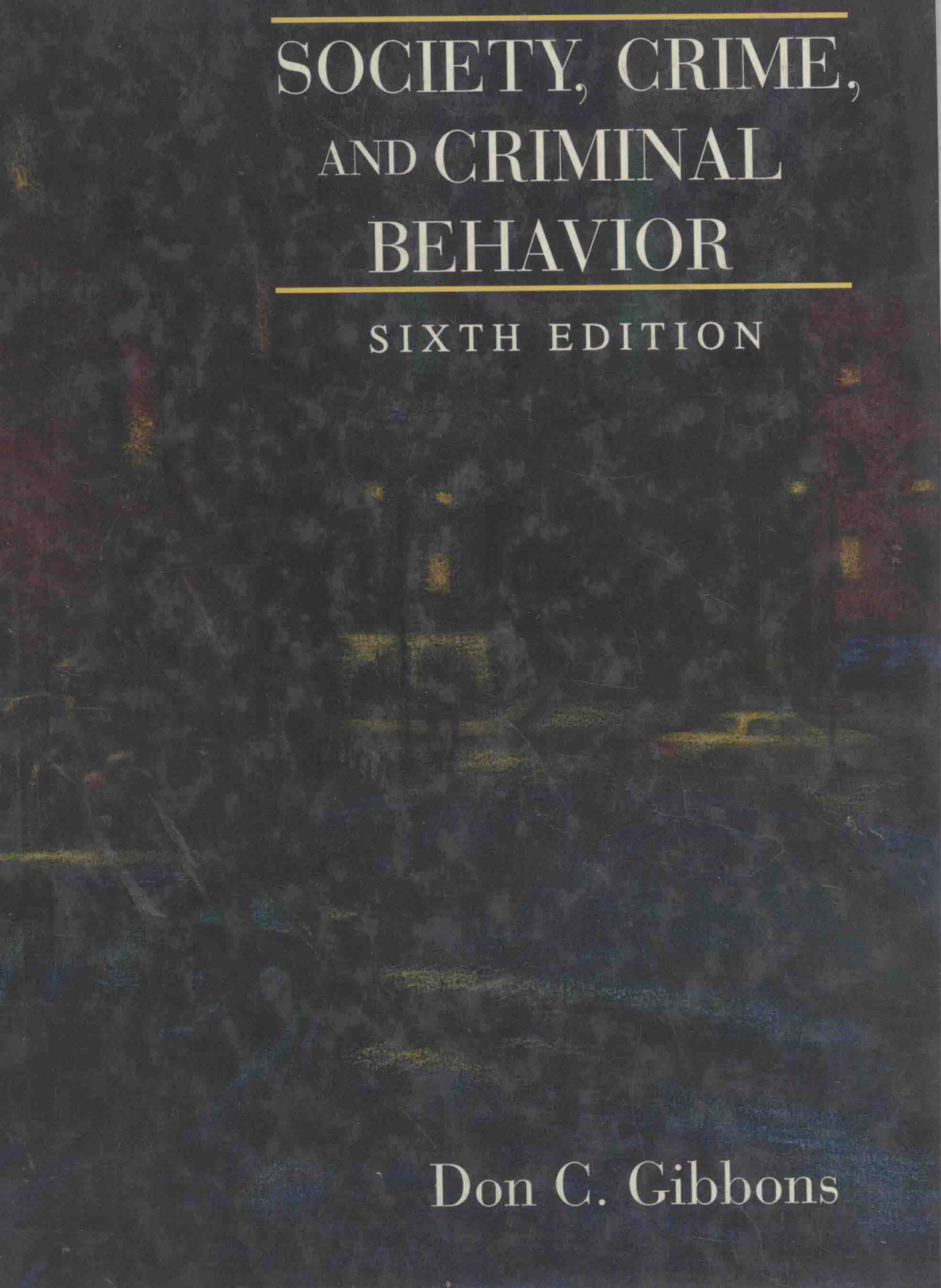
SOCIETY, CRIME, AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

SIXTH EDITION



Don C. Gibbons

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To Carmen, my wife and best friend

affluent society. Some of the alienated members of the underclass turn to crime as a crude form of income redistribution. My guess is that the culprits who made off with my car were such persons.

This book argues that most criminals are normal people who are responding to economic pressures or other features of the social structure of complex societies, rather than flawed individuals whose lawbreaking has biological or psychological causes. This text is an introduction to criminology—the study of lawmaking, lawbreaking, and social responses to violations of criminal laws. Much of the theory and research evidence on crime and criminals has been produced by sociologists. At the same time, biological factors or psychological pressures may play some part in certain kinds of criminality; these influences are also given attention in the pages of this book.

Most of the chapters of this sixth edition have been extensively revised, and a good deal of material has been added to each. For example, a new discussion of unemployment and crime is included in Chapter 11 (predatory crime), new material on forcible rape appears in Chapter 12 (violent crimes), recent developments in radical-Marxist criminology are considered in Chapter 6, and Chapter 16 (female crime) now contains a detailed discussion of feminist perspectives in criminology. On the other hand, I have pruned out claims that seem unsupportable in the light of recent evidence. Finally, I have attempted to update the entire book by including most of the relevant theoretical developments and research studies that have appeared in recent years.

I have made a diligent effort in this and previous editions to avoid sexist forms of expression, such as *policemen;* obviously, women are also employed as police officers. Regrettably, sexist language does crop up in some of the quotes included in these pages. It would be improper to alter those words and clumsy to insert [*sic*] in each case; hence I have left them untouched.

Textbook writers not uncommonly allude in their prefatory remarks to the great personal sacrifices they have made in writing their books. They also tend to portray book writing as an extremely arduous task. My own view is that well-written textbooks on subjects such as criminology play a central role in undergraduate education. Unfortunately, textbook writing is an art that not all scholars are able to master. There is indeed a lot of hard work that goes into the production of a textbook. However, it is also true, at least in my own case, that writing is an enjoyable and rewarding activity. Hence I do not intend to close this preface by describing the great suffering I experienced in producing this sixth edition.

I would like to acknowledge the valuable advice on feminist theory offered by my colleague, Kathryn A. Farr. Also, I want to thank Kenneth Polk of the University of Melbourne, Australia, for a number of extremely helpful comments and suggestions about the book which he provided in our seminars and conversations at Seaview University.

Don C. Gibbons

About the Author

Don C. Gibbons is Professor Emeritus of Urban Studies and Sociology, Portland State University. He is author of seven books on criminology and deviance, including *Delinquent Behavior* and *The Criminological Enterprise*. He is a fellow of the American Society of Criminology.

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Crime in Modern Society

THE UBIQUITY OF CRIME
THE ELASTIC BOUNDARIES OF CRIME
CRIME AS NATURAL SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

"Crime is merely a left-handed form of human endeavor," declared W. R. Burnett in his novel *The Asphalt Jungle,* which was made into one of the most authentic crime movies ever produced in the United States. The central theme in this book is that lawbreaking and law-abiding conduct are two sides of the same coin. These activities go hand in hand, and both reflect the character of the societies in which they appear. Burnett proposed that the core values around which American society is organized generate the seeds of crime. In a society that measures success almost entirely in terms of material accomplishments and "getting ahead," the moral sensibilities of many of those who get caught up in the struggle for wealth and material goals become attenuated. They begin to lie, cheat, steal, or follow other illicit pathways to success. Burnett also endeavored to show us that the markers that separate law-abiding individuals from lawbreakers are relatively indistinct in American society, and that great numbers of citizens in all walks of life are involved in one form or another of dishonest or illegal conduct. Burnett has written a number of novels dealing with crime. He is an acute observer whose reports about criminality in American society ring true. However, it can hardly be said that his views are widely shared in the United States.

Crime is a topic of enduring interest to most Americans, as any quick perusal of the mass media will show. For example, a number of leading television programs in the 1980s and 1990s have dealt with the police and their problems with lawbreakers.[1] Most of this attention is focused on "crime in the streets" and on what some have termed *garden-variety crime*—robberies, simple thefts, assaults, rapes, and a few other crude and forceful offenses. Corporate crime and other violations by socially powerful persons are less often noticed; equally obscured are various mundane, low-level violations of the law that are common in complex societies.

Popular conceptions of the crime problem diverge in another way from the picture sketched by Burnett. Like certain nineteenth-century British stereotypes, they assume that crime is the work of "the dangerous classes."[2] In this view, malefactors are depraved or alien, antisocial beings in a society in which most of us are law-abiding and upright.[3] They are thought to be the products of such things as biological quirks or disruptions of normal family life. Most laypersons are unimpressed by sociological arguments that offenders are often impelled toward criminality by forces arising from the social and economic order of modern societies.

Many Americans have a love-hate relationship with lawbreaking; they are both fascinated by portrayals of crime in the mass media and fearful of being robbed, burglarized, assaulted, or victimized in some other way. The apprehensiveness of citizens about crime in the streets has been amply documented. For example, surveys undertaken in the past several decades have repeatedly shown that most people feel that crime is a worsening problem in their communities (curiously, though, many of them feel safe near their homes, even if they live in high-crime areas).[4] Traditionally, most Americans have attributed lawbreaking to the breakdown of moral standards or kindred factors rather than to de-

leterious social conditions. Moreover, most have embraced repressive or punitive measures, rather than ameliorative steps, to curb crime.

Most popular beliefs about criminality in modern societies do not survive close examination. For one thing, it is by no means clear that American society is undergoing a crime wave of massive proportions. Although accurate pre-twentieth-century American crime statistics are not available, historical accounts suggest that lawlessness was exceedingly common earlier in American history.[5] Then, too, apparent surges of crime may actually reflect increased reporting of offenses or the proliferation of new laws rather than changes in the levels of lawbreaking. One instructive report in this regard is a Portland, Oregon, victimization survey indicating that the incidence of burglary declined in that city from 1971–72 to 1973–74. During the same period, the proportion of burglary incidents reported to the police increased. The result was that the official burglary rate increased, creating the erroneous impression that burglary was on the rise in Portland.[6] Some criminologists have argued that apparent increases in forcible rape and certain other crimes in recent years may similarly reflect increased crime reporting rather than actual changes in crime amounts.

Whatever the truth concerning crime waves, criminological research has amply documented Daniel Bell's claim that crime is an American way of life.[7] In modern American society crime is found everywhere: on the streets, in college buildings, in corporate boardrooms, in skid row alleys, and on the highways. In short, there are myriad forms and generous amounts of lawbreaking in modern societies; criminality and criminals are clearly not rare in the United States.

Citizen perspectives on crime causation are also flawed.[8] Although bizarre acts of criminality by persons suffering from personality pathology are sometimes encountered, these make up only a very small part of the crime problem in modern societies. The lion's share of crime in America is rooted in societal conditions. For example, abundant evidence links organized crime in our society to ethnic status, economic discrimination directed at certain ethnic groups, and pressures toward upward mobility that are experienced by nearly all citizens, conformists and lawbreakers alike. Also, organized crime is often related to efforts by lawmakers to legislate morality by forbidding people to gamble, drink, or engage in other activities that many of them would like to pursue. Americans may take comfort in blaming the drug problem on Colombians, Bolivians, and Panamanians, but it is Americans themselves who are the principal customers of drug dealers, most of whom are also their fellow citizens. Finally, garden-variety street crime is usually carried on by poor people who are surrounded by highly visible signs of affluence. Some of the alienated and resentful who feel the sting of deprivation in an acquisitive society try to bring about income distribution at gunpoint or through other illegal means.

The discussion thus far has touched upon some major themes and broad arguments about crime. These are core propositions of the criminological perspective to which most sociological criminologists hold allegiance. Let us examine these contentions in a bit more detail.

THE UBIQUITY OF CRIME

Although many of the facts concerning crime in modern society are in dispute, there is little question that lawbreaking is omnipresent in contemporary America. Masses of evidence indicate that criminality is extremely common in this country and much more frequent than in most other industrialized nations. Although Chapter 5 examines the existing data on crime in detail, a quick look at a handful of crime statistics will amply illustrate this point.

According to statistics collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there were 21,500 murder and nonnegligent manslaughter cases, 94,500 forcible rapes, 578,330 robberies, and 951,710 instances of aggravated assault reported to the police in the United States in 1989. Also, the police were informed of 3,168,200 burglaries, 7,872,400 larcenies, and 1,564,800 cases of car theft.[9] These figures indicate that 14,251,440 serious crimes were reported to the police in a single year, in a nation with a total population of 248,239,900.

However, these figures only begin to tell the story of crime in America. What about those offenses that, for one reason or another, go unreported? Some indication of the extent of "the dark figure of crime"—that is, unreported or undetected lawbreaking—is offered in Table 1.1, derived from the results of a national crime survey carried out by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in collaboration with the Department of Justice. In that survey, a sample of individuals and households were interviewed about their experience with crime in 1988. The results were then employed as the basis for estimates of the total number of victimizations in the United States that year. The most important observation from the table is that in the case of a number of the crimes surveyed, less than half the victimizations were reported to the police. It is thus clear that official statistics drastically understate the magnitude of crime in the nation.

TABLE 1.1 Estimated Number of Personal and Household Victimizations, United States, 1988

Type of Victimization	*Total*	*Percentage Reported to the Police*	*Percentage Not Reported to the Police*
Personal victimizations			
Rape and attempted rape	127,000	48	52
Robbery	1,048,000	57	43
Assault	4,734,000	46	51
Personal larceny with contact	489,000	35	65
Personal larceny without contact	13,567,000	27	73
Household victimizations			
Burglary	5,777,000	51	49
Larceny	8,419,000	26	74
Vehicle theft	1,634,000	73	27

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Bulletin: Criminal Victimization 1988* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1989), p. 7.

These data reveal something about the extent of garden-variety crimes in the United States, but they provide only a partial accounting of lawbreaking. In particular, official crime statistics and citizens' reports of victimization reveal little about criminal acts by corporations and other business organizations. Although these latter kinds of lawbreaking are widespread and very costly to the general public, they are much less frequently brought to our attention by the mass media than the dramatic instances of garden-variety crime. Then, too, business crimes often touch upon a diffuse collection of victims, many of whom are unaware that they have been victimized. It is for reasons of this sort that much white-collar lawbreaking goes unrecognized.

It takes only a bit of digging to unearth abundant evidence of white-collar crime.[10] For example, a number of reports have documented widespread criminal violations by major pharmaceutical manufacturers in the United States.[11] In one of these, Kurtz drew attention to a number of cases in which unfavorable laboratory test results were tampered with or hidden from the Food and Drug Administration.[12] The new drugs thus tested were then placed on the market and distributed to patients, even though the offending companies were aware of their negative side effects, such as blood disorders, liver damage, cataracts, or severe hair loss. Extremely lenient penalties have been standard in these cases, and in the case of other corporate offenses as well. Kurtz argued that the Food and Drug Administration rarely goes beyond wrist-slapping of drug manufacturers, because it is dominated by officials with ties to the organizations it is supposed to police.

The crime problem in modern societies also involves a large number of less dramatic but commonplace offenses that one criminologist has termed *folk crimes.*[13] These are violations of laws introduced to solve problems arising out of the increased complexity and division of labor in modern societies. Traffic-law violations, "chiseling" on unemployment compensation, and violations of certain regulatory statutes governing business and commerce are instances of folk crime. Folk, or *mundane,* crime also includes such low-visibility offenses as failure by divorced spouses to provide child-support payments, violations of fish and game laws,[14] and vandalism in public parks,[15] all of which are widespread. Most folk crimes provoke mild social responses, carry a low degree of social stigma, and are often engaged in by persons of high social status. They are also dealt with in a variety of administrative ways; for example, traffic-law violations are disposed of through special bureaus, bail forfeiture, and other ways outside of courts. Although it is easy to minimize the significance of folk crimes, because they make up a large part of modern-day criminality, they cannot be ignored or dismissed as "not really crimes."

That lawbreaking is frequent and widespread in American society is a claim with which criminologists do not quarrel. There is, however, a good deal of disagreement regarding the rates of criminality assumed to be associated with different groups in our society. In particular, opinions differ markedly as to whether crime is proportionately more frequent among blacks than among whites. Some criminologists maintain that American blacks are more frequently

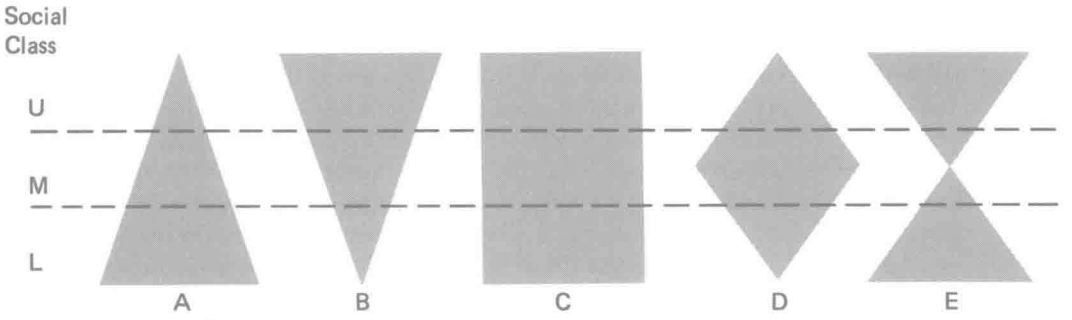

FIGURE 1.1 Crime rates and social class.

involved in lawbreaking than are whites. But, many others claim that this seemingly excessive criminality reflects discriminatory law enforcement rather than inordinate involvement in criminality by blacks. Then, too, those who assert that blacks are more heavily implicated in crime base their arguments on statistics of reported garden-variety crimes and gloss over the evidence of unreported crime and white-collar criminality.

Criminologists are also divided on the question of social class and crime. Conventional crime statistics suggest that criminal acts are concentrated among those who are at the bottom of the economic heap in our society. Yet it may well be that these data provide indicators of law-enforcement practices rather than the distribution of crime. If it were possible to assemble data on all the forms of criminality in our society, including garden-variety offenses, white-collar crime, and folk crime, it might be discovered that lawbreaking is actually distributed in some other way. See, for example, Figure 1.1, which contrasts the "conventional" pattern (A) with four alternatives (B, C, D, and E). Pattern A illustrates the view that crime rates are highest among groups at the bottom of the economic ladder. Pattern B places the highest rates of lawbreaking at the top of the social-class structure. Pattern C suggests that equal rates of crime occur across social classes; D portrays the idea that crime rates are highest among middle-income citizens. Finally, pattern E represents a *bimodal* distribution of criminality, with the economically most advantaged and least advantaged showing the highest rates.

Many analysts in the United States have opted for the hypothesis that deviant behavior and criminality are most common among the economically disadvantaged.[16] Other criminologists find this argument unpersuasive. The latter group includes radical criminologists, who contend that in capitalist societies members of a ruling class and other socially powerful citizens are most involved in criminal acts. Still other criminologists have reached conclusions that parallel pattern C in Figure 1.1—that there is no significant link between social class and criminality.[17] For example, a survey in New Jersey, Oregon, and Iowa conducted by Charles Tittle and Wayne Villemez in 1972 asked people whether they had engaged in certain crimes.[18] Self-reported crimes were equally frequent among persons from different social classes. However, two of the six