

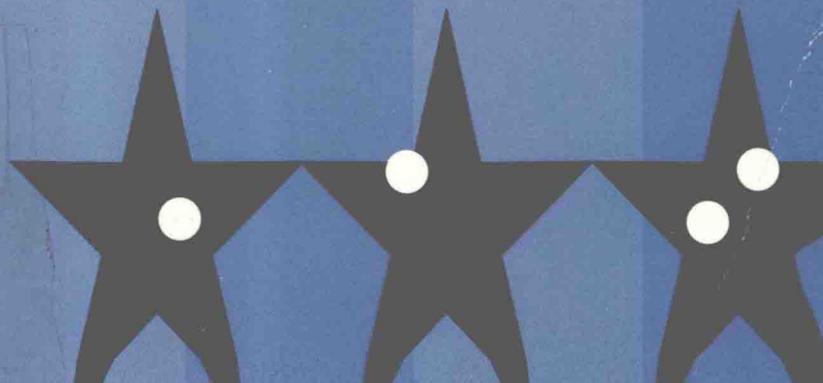
# CRIME

AND THE

## *American Dream*

STEVEN F. MESSNER

RICHARD ROSENFELD



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# Crime and the American Dream

Second Edition

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*Nothing happens unless first a dream.*  
—Carl Sandburg



# Preface

**T**his book has been written with two purposes in mind. The first is to present a plausible explanation of the exceptionally high levels of serious crime in the United States. The second is to formulate this explanation using the basic ideas, insights, and conceptual tools of sociology.

Each of these purposes rests on an underlying premise, one empirical, the other epistemological. The empirical premise is that crime rates are, in fact, exceptionally high in the United States. Some level of criminal activity may be a normal feature of all societies, as Émile Durkheim proposed almost a century ago. However, both the level of and the preoccupation with serious crime in America are quite striking, especially when the United States is compared with other highly developed nations. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are reported in the book to support our empirical claim about the distinctiveness of the American experience with crime.

An important epistemological premise also informs our inquiry. We are convinced that the formulation of a satisfactory explanation of cross-national variation in crime will require the systematic application of sociological knowledge and principles, which together comprise the “sociological perspective.” Some sociologists will undoubtedly reject the notion that there is any common intellectual terrain that can be so described. Nonetheless, although we recognize the diversity of theoretical and metatheoretical orientations in the field, we are convinced that a set of common concepts and assumptions forms the corpus of the discipline. This is, after all, what we teach our students year after year, and what we require as part of a core curriculum for both graduate and undergraduate students. In a sense, then, we set out in

this book to “put sociology to work” on a substantive problem of considerable theoretical and practical significance. The great advantage of the sociological perspective, in our view, is that it requires that attention be paid to both of the fundamental features of any organized social system: people’s beliefs, values, goals—the stuff of culture—and the positions and roles that people occupy in society—what sociologists term “social structure.” Neither of these two basic features of social organization may be ignored a priori in sociological analysis. It may, of course, turn out that a particular social phenomenon, such as crime, is more heavily dependent on one or the other of these features. But this must be demonstrated; it cannot be assumed. The sociological burden of proof always rests with those who would cast out one of the basic aspects of social organization and privilege the other. The focus on both culture and social structure, and on the interplay between them, has been an invaluable analytical tool for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of influential explanations of crime, as well as for developing our own thesis.

The essence of our argument is that the distinctive patterns and levels of crime in the United States are produced by the cultural and structural organization of American society. American culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on the goal of monetary success and a weak emphasis on the importance of the legitimate means for the pursuit of success. This combination of strong pressures to succeed monetarily and weak restraints on the selection of means is intrinsic to the dominant cultural ethos: the American Dream. The American Dream contributes to crime directly by encouraging people to employ illegal means to achieve goals that are culturally approved. It also exerts an indirect effect on crime through its interconnections with the institutional balance of power in society.

The American Dream promotes and sustains an institutional structure in which one institution—the economy—assumes dominance over all others. The resulting imbalance in the institutional structure diminishes the capacity of other institutions, such as the family, education, and the political system, to curb criminogenic cultural pressures and to impose controls over the behavior of members of society. In these ways, the distinctive cultural commitments of the American Dream and its companion institutional arrangements contribute to high levels of crime.

Although we began writing this book convinced of the general thesis that high levels of crime in the United States are related to basic features of social organization, we never anticipated many of the specific arguments that have emerged as a result of our intellectual efforts. Novelists and playwrights describe how characters and plot can assume “a life of their own” and lead the author in unforeseen directions. Something like this occurred as we worked our way through the connections between crime and the American Dream. The use of the sociological perspective necessitated a more systematic and critical appraisal of existing theory and research on crime—including our own—than we intended.

At the beginning, we conceived of this book as a summary statement of criminological research within the anomie tradition, where much of our

research has been located, and as a call for continued work in this area. However, the sociological perspective led us to rethink some of the basic assumptions and interpretations of anomie theory, such as the presumed association between crime and social stratification. We continue to believe that anomie theory offers significant insights regarding the nature of crime and of the American crime problem in particular. But the contributions of anomie theory, and those of alternative theoretical approaches, will be realized fully only when situated in a more general sociological perspective on crime and social organization.

Writing this book was a process of discovery or, more precisely, rediscovery of the value of the sociological way of viewing the world. Although we have developed an explanation of crime that differs from other explanations in important respects, many of the ideas underlying our explanation are not original; they are part of the common heritage of modern sociology. Our thinking about culture, social structure, and crime fits within an intellectual environment shaped by Émile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Marx. Our analysis of social institutions is highly compatible with the recent contribution of Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *The Good Society*. Our conception of sociological inquiry has been influenced by scholars as diverse as Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills, both of whom insisted that the separate parts of a society always must be understood with reference to the whole. Finally, we owe an incalculable intellectual debt to Robert K. Merton, on whose shoulders our sociological explanation of crime stands most directly.

## THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 introduces the central premise of our explanation of crime, namely, that high levels of serious crime result from the normal functioning of the American social system. This chapter also presents the core components of the American Dream. We describe how they contribute to the openness and dynamic quality of American society, as well as to “the dark side” of the American experience: high rates of crime. Chapter 1 ends with a description of Merton’s formulation of the anomie perspective on crime. We suggest that, despite ups and downs over time in the appeal of Merton’s argument to criminologists, and significant substantive limitations that are addressed in subsequent chapters, anomie theory has enduring value in the study of crime.

In Chapter 2 we describe in detail the nature of the crime problem in the contemporary United States. We present evidence on both “crimes in the streets” and “crimes in the suites” to substantiate the underlying empirical premise of the book, that there is indeed something distinctive about crime and the response to crime in the United States. The descriptive material in Chapter 2 essentially reveals, in the form of statistical indicators and human responses, a social reality of crime that a comprehensive sociological theory must be capable of explaining.

We turn in Chapter 3 to a review of the dominant sociological perspectives in contemporary criminology. We consider the more individualistic, social psychological approaches to crime as well as their macrolevel analogues. Each of the perspectives reviewed contains valuable insights about the origins of crime, but each is also limited in important respects. We propose that, among conventional approaches, the anomie perspective holds the greatest promise for a macrolevel explanation of crime because of its sociological completeness. In contrast with alternative perspectives, anomie theory incorporates into its explanatory framework both cultural and structural dynamics. We also identify the more important limitations of conventional anomie theory, especially the curious neglect of institutional dynamics by supporters and critics alike.

Chapter 4 presents our macrosociological explanation of crime. We identify the anomic tendencies of the American Dream and show how these tendencies are both reflected in and reproduced by an institutional structure dominated by the economy. Our analysis focuses on four major social institutions: the family, the educational system, the political system, and, of course, the economy. We substantiate our claim of institutional imbalance by pointing to three manifestations of economic dominance: (1) the devaluation of noneconomic functions and roles, (2) the accommodation to economic demands required of other institutions, and (3) the penetration into other institutional domains of economic standards. Finally, we discuss the interconnections between anomic cultural orientations, weak institutional control, and levels and patterns of crime.

We conclude in Chapter 5 with an extended discussion of the theoretical and policy implications of the analysis. Our thesis offers a serious challenge to both criminological theorists and policy makers. It implies that criminological theories that neglect the ironic interdependence between crime and the normal functioning of the social system will be unable to explain the American experience with crime. Moreover, if our analysis is valid, significant reductions in crime will not result from conservative “get tough” policies of crime control, nor from conventional liberal proposals to broaden access to the American Dream. Effective crime control will, instead, require fundamental transformations in the organization of American society and a rethinking of a dream that is the envy of the world.

## THE REVISED EDITION

The fact that you are reading the preface to the second edition of *Crime and the American Dream* indicates that the first edition attracted sufficient attention to justify the cost to the publisher of producing a new one. In revising the book, we have updated statistical data and introduced new illustrations. We have also made a few substantive revisions that are intended to clarify and strengthen our major arguments, although the core thesis has not been altered

in any significant way. We have expanded the discussion in Chapter 2 of cross-national differences in crime to encompass variation in the form as well as the level of offending. In Chapter 3 we have sought to clarify the distinction between “macro” and “micro” levels of analysis with an example that should have particular relevance to college students: the relationship between education and unemployment. In Chapter 4 we extend our basic argument about cross-national differences in crime to account for the social distribution of crime within the United States. This discussion focuses on two of the most important correlates of criminal behavior: gender and race. Finally, throughout the second edition we have incorporated citations to recent scholarship on American culture and institutional structure. Of particular note are Barry Schwartz’s insights concerning “economic imperialism” in American society, Jennifer Hochschild’s analysis of the American Dream and the racial crisis, and Carl Husemoller Nightingale’s juxtaposition of inner-city children’s aspirations and life chances.<sup>1</sup>

Above all else, authors want their work to be taken seriously, and we have had the good fortune of receiving serious critical commentary from scholars, students, and other readers. *Crime and the American Dream* was featured in an “Authors-Meet-Critics” session held at the 1994 meeting of the American Society of Criminology. In the course of this intellectual exchange with some of the very best scholars working in criminology today, we received valuable advice regarding the research implications of our analysis. That advice, put most directly by Francis T. Cullen, was in essence “use it or lose it.” By this he meant that our ideas about crime must be continuously reexamined and refined in research, for it is in the research process that ideas are “used” by social scientists.

We have begun to confront Cullen’s challenge. Since the publication of the first edition, we have sought to elaborate and test some of the implications of our argument, and other researchers have as well.<sup>2</sup> Some of the results of these efforts are reported in Chapter 5. We encourage readers of the new edition to perform their own tests of our ideas against evidence available from other studies and from their personal observations and experiences. In this way, our contribution will not be “lost” even if readers conclude that our account of crime requires more than the modest changes introduced in the new edition.

## NOTES

1. Schwartz (1994b); Hochschild (1995); Nightingale (1993).

2. See Messner and Rosenfeld (1994, 1996) and Rosenfeld and Messner (1995, 1996). Chamlin and Cochran

(1995) tested hypotheses derived from our argument using data for U.S. states. For a debate over the results of their study, see Jensen (1996) and Chamlin and Cochran (1996).



# Acknowledgments

**W**e are grateful to those colleagues who have taken the time to write to us about their own and their students' reactions to *Crime and the American Dream*, and to the reviewers who provided such competent criticism of the first edition and such clear guidance for improving the second. Among the reviewers who offered insightful comments and suggestions on the manuscript were Robert Agnew, Amory University; Thomas J. Bernard, Pennsylvania State University; David Bordua, University of Illinois; Robert J. Bursik, Jr., University of Oklahoma; Mitchell B. Chamlin, University of Cincinnati; Roland Chilton, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Richard Hawkins, Southern Methodist University; Robert F. Meier, Iowa State University; John Stratton, University of Iowa; and Austin Turk, University of California, Riverside. We made revisions in response to some of those suggestions and sharpened the focus of our arguments in response to others. Serina Beauparlant, our editor at Wadsworth for the first edition, enthusiastically supported the book from the outset. Her enthusiasm bolstered our confidence on more than one occasion when we began to doubt the merits of the project. We also wish to acknowledge the encouragement and patience of Eve Howard, our editor during the preparation of the revised edition. The graphics appearing in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 reflect the skill, patience, and persistence of Richard Rabe and Chris Reichard. Eric Baumer devoted exceptional care and good humor to the task of checking citations and references. Finally, Richard Rosenfeld would like to thank the University of Missouri–St. Louis for a research leave that made it possible to devote sustained attention to the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to our parents, spouses, and children, who have facilitated and tempered our pursuit of the American Dream.



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# A Society Organized for Crime

Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.

VINCE LOMBARDI,  
FOOTBALL COACH

By any means necessary.

MALCOLM X,  
BLACK NATIONALIST

In November 1990, Michael Milken, who headed the high-yield bond department of Drexel Burnham Lambert, was sentenced to ten years in prison for violating federal securities laws. The indictment against Milken charged that he had earned as much as \$550 million in a single year from his illegal activities; at sentencing, the loss from Milken's violations was estimated at a much lower but still considerable figure of approximately \$318,000.<sup>1</sup> A *New York Times* editorial supported the stiff penalty handed down by federal Judge Kimba Wood, which also included a three-year term of probation, 5,400 hours of community service, and over \$1 billion in fines and restitution. The *Times* observed that Judge Wood had sent a "wake-up call" to the financial community that the days of "wrist-slapping" for crimes committed on Wall Street were over.<sup>2</sup>

Milken had pioneered the use of high-risk, high-yield bonds as instruments to facilitate swift corporate buyouts and takeovers. Although critics viewed the so-called "junk bond" as a destructive weapon of corporate warfare, Milken saw his financial innovations as part of a mission to reform the American economy. Even the *New York Times* appeared to agree with at least some aspects of Milken's positive self-assessment. Just five days after advocating strong punishments to send messages to Wall Street, the *Times* published another editorial warning against "premature moralizing" about Milken's role in a "decade of greed." He had, after all, used the junk bond to provide much needed credit for hundreds of new companies. For those able to survive the recession, the *Times* suggested, Milken's innovative legacy would look brighter.