

CRIME

AND THE

*American
Dream*

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Crime and the American Dream

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Wadsworth Publishing Company

Belmont, California

A Division of Wadsworth, Inc.

Editor: Serina Beauparlant
Editorial Assistant: Susan Shook
Production: Sara Hunsaker / *Ex Libris*
Print Buyer: Karen Hunt
Permissions Editor: Bob Kauser
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Cover: Stephen Rapley
Signing Representatives: Susan Hayes, Tammy Goldfeld
Compositor: Patricia Douglass
Printer: Malloy Lithographing, Inc.
For additional credits, see page viii.



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International Thomson Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—97 96 95 94 93

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Messner, Steven F.,

Crime and the American Dream / Steven F. Messner, Richard Rosenfeld.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-534-20106-7

1. Criminology—United States. 2. Social structure—United States.

3. Anomie. I. Rosenfeld, Richard. II. Title.

HV6022.U6M47 1993

364.973—dc20

93-25972

ISBN 0-534-20106-7

Preface

This book has been written with two purposes in mind. The first is to present a reasonably cogent 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 upon an underlying premise, one empirical, the other epistemological. The empirical premise is that crime rates are exceptionally high in the United States. Some level of criminal activity may be a normal feature of all societies, as Emile 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 this 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 there is a set of concepts and assumptions that form 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 greatest 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, as well as 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; as we have stated, 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 Emile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Marx. Our analysis of social institutions is highly compatible with the recent contribution of Robert Bellah and 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 Robert K. 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, as well as 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 both evidence on “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 macro-level 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 macro-level 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 (or the *polity*) 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 high levels 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 policymakers. It implies that criminological theories that neglect the ironic interdependence between crime and the normal functioning of the American social system will be unable to explain the distinctive levels and patterns of crime in the United States. Moreover, if our analysis is valid, significant reductions in crime will not result from conservative “get tough” policies of crime control, nor from alternative 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.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to colleagues and students for critical reactions both to specific arguments contained in this book and to the many ideas that have served as the foundation for these arguments. Among the reviewers who offered insightful comments and suggestions on the manuscript were: Tom Bernard, Pennsylvania State University; David Bordua, University of Illinois; Roland Chilton, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Richard Hawkins, Southern Methodist 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, has 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. The graphics appearing in Chapters 2 and 4 reflect the skill, patience, and persistence of Chris Reichard of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Eric Baumer, also of the University of Missouri–St. Louis, 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.

*Steven F. Messner
Richard Rosenfeld*

Credits

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Nothing happens unless first a dream.

—— *Carl Sandburg*

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1

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 of 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 figure of approximately \$318,000.¹ 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 \$600 million 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.²

Milken had pioneered the use of high-risk, high-yield bonds as instruments to facilitate swift corporate buy-outs and takeovers. While 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. Judge Kimba Wood evidently shared the *Times*' ambivalence about Milken's misdeeds, for she reduced his prison sentence from ten years to two years in August of 1992 in return for his cooperation in a subsequent investigation.³ In a final note of irony to the Milken story, Judge Wood has been characterized in legal circles in terms strikingly similar to those applied to Michael Milken, as an independent and intelligent judge willing to pursue "innovative solutions" to legal problems.⁴

Michael Milken's story illustrates the paradoxes inherent in the sources of and responses to crime in the United States. The very qualities in which Milken took pride and for which he was praised—his daring, energy, intelligence, and, most important, his ability to create and willingness to use innovative solutions for conventional problems—also led to his crimes and punishment. These qualities are not merely the personal traits of a particular criminal (or "economic reformer"); they are elements of social character rooted in broad value orientations within American culture that help to shape both the archetypal American hero and the archetypal American villain. There is an even more fundamental sociological principle revealed by the Milken case: the ironic interdependence between good and evil in social life. As the sociologist Kai Erikson explains, "the deviant and the conformist . . . are creatures of the same culture, inventions of the same imagination."⁵ To understand fully the nature and level of crime in a society, therefore, it is essential to consider the distinguishing features of that society, particularly its distinctive cultural imagination.

CRIME AND RESPONSES TO CRIME IN AMERICA

The ironic interdependence of deviance and conformity applies not only to the kinds of financial crimes for which Milken was convicted but to crime more generally, including crimes of violence. Indeed, although property crimes and violent crimes might appear on the surface to be quite different, many violent crimes are similar to the so-called "suite"

crimes of high finance in an important respect: they involve a willingness to “innovate,” that is, to use technically efficient but illegitimate means to solve conventional problems.

The Nature and Level of Criminal Violence

Fictional accounts of violent crime frequently involve exotic motives and elaborate planning. In fact, much criminal violence is quite mundane. It is the outcome of a commonplace dispute between a victim and an offender who know one another. These disputes often arise from economic transactions gone awry. The following scenarios, drawn from police case files in St. Louis, illustrate the role of homicide in settling disputes related to drug transactions:⁶

Suspect bought two bags of coke from victim. One of the bags was not dope. Suspect followed victim and witness in a car. Victim stopped his car, got out, and began approaching suspect's car. Suspect opened fire. Victim dead on scene.

Victim was a “runner”—delivering drugs for a seller. He was nervous because he was short his “turn in.” A friend lent him \$2,500 cash the evening before the victim was killed. Victim liked to “flash” cash and expensive jewelry, and talk about what he could afford to buy. The seller denied having anything to do with victim's death. He was later murdered.

Police were looking for seller so he gave victim his stash to hold for him. Victim refused to return it. On night of shooting, victim had gone to White Castle with her husband. While he was out of the car, victim disappeared, apparently abducted by suspects. According to a secret witness, victim was shot while sitting in the car with two suspects at location where car was found. Victim had ripped off dealers several times by never paying in full or driving off with drugs. Victim had once been ripped off herself when dealer took her money and did not give her drugs.

A common theme running through these events is an economic dispute that is “settled” by the use of violent means. The disputes arise from economic problems that are quite conventional in origin (faulty or fraudulent merchandise, payments overdue, bad debts, common thefts). However, none of these problems or the resulting disputes can be settled through conventional (i.e., legal) means, because they all involve illegal activities. Because access to conventional dispute-resolution mechanisms (lawyers, courts, legally imposed restitution, fines, etc.) is blocked in these cases, their resolution requires the innovative use of unconventional means. Many crimes, including homicides, have been characterized as a form of “self-help” directed at rule infractions for which conventional legal responses are either ineffective or, as in these cases, unavailable.⁷

The use of violent means to achieve or regain control in “underworld” markets, like the use of informal nonviolent means (such as price fixing or insider trading) to control legitimate markets, receives strong, if indirect, cultural support in our society. High rates of gun-related violence, in particular, result in part from a cultural ethos that encourages the rapid deployment of technically efficient methods to solve interpersonal problems. The widespread availability and use of firearms, by offenders and rule enforcers alike, represent not simply the strength or persistence of a “gun culture,” which itself requires explanation, but a much deeper cultural orientation that either permits or does not strongly discourage the attainment of goals “by any means necessary.”

This “anything goes” mentality results in a volume of criminal violence in the United States that is truly remarkable. Consider levels of the most serious violent crime: homicide. More than 23,000 homicides were reported to the police the year that Michael Milken went to prison. The U.S. homicide rate is higher than that of any other developed nation in the world.⁸ In 1973, more homicides occurred in the city of St. Louis, Mo. (population 550,000), than in the nation of Scotland (population 5,200,000) during the previous five years combined—and Scottish homicide rates are considered high by European standards.⁹

Fear of Crime

Not surprisingly, high levels of violent crime in the United States result in widespread fear of crime. Forty percent of the adult population—and over half of black American adults—are afraid to walk alone at night in their own neighborhoods.¹⁰ Fear of crime has been shown to reduce residents’ satisfaction with their neighborhood and to instill a desire to abandon the neighborhood for safer surroundings. One observer has suggested that fear of crime, more than racial prejudice, explains why a California jury found four white police officers not guilty in the widely publicized beating in Los Angeles of Rodney King, a black man, that sparked protests and rioting in the spring of 1992.¹¹

The pervasive fear of crime observed in the United States is not an inevitable feature of modern, industrial societies. On the contrary, it is a distinctly American phenomenon. Freda Adler, a comparative criminologist who has studied crime in many nations throughout the modern world, concludes that the American

preoccupation with crime is not a national past-time in more countries than one. Neither the design of doors and windows, nor the front page stories in the national press, nor the budgetary allocations of municipal and national governments indicate any obsession with crime, the fear of crime, the fear of victimization, or indeed, the national destiny.¹²