



Introduction to the Book

An Overview of Issues in Criminological Theory

Welcome to the world of criminological theory! It is an exciting and complex endeavor that explains why certain individuals and groups commit crimes and why other people do not. This book will explore the conceptual history of this endeavor as well as current theories. Most of us can relate directly to many of these theories; we may know friends or family members who fit dominant models of criminal behavior.

This introduction begins by describing what criminology is; what distinguishes it from other perspectives of crime, such as religion, journalism, and philosophy; and how definitions of crime vary across time and place. Then it examines some of the major issues used to classify different theories of criminology. After exploring the various paradigms and categories of criminological theory, we discuss what characteristics help to make a theory a good one—in criminology or in any scientific field. In addition, we review the specific criteria for proving causality—for showing which predictors or variables actually cause criminal behavior. We also explain why—for logistic and ethical reasons—few theories in criminology will ever meet the strict criteria required to prove that key factors actually cause criminal behavior. Finally, we look at the strengths and weaknesses of the various measures of crime, which are used to test the validity of all criminological theories, and what those measures reveal about how crime is distributed across various individuals and groups. Although the discussion of crime distribution, as shown by various measures of criminality, may seem removed from our primary discussion regarding theories of why certain