

indicating that crime is decreasing, the basic facts of crime and punishment are dauntingly grim, and the statistics do not begin to do justice to the toll crime takes on its victims.

Residents in poor urban areas continue to experience the highest rates of crime. Victims of crime who live in poor areas, with few social supports, sometimes end their journey of victimization by becoming criminals themselves. One study (Bennett, 2007) identified three pathways to explain how the cycle of violence can be perpetuated or victimization can lead to offending: retaliation toward the perpetrator, the victim lashing out indiscriminately out of frustration and anger, or the victim befriending his or her attackers. This is evidence of why crime victims, especially children, adolescents, and young adults, need social work assistance.

And as the cycle of violence continues, criminals are increasingly becoming victims themselves. In Baltimore, about 91 percent of murder victims in 2006 had criminal records. In Philadelphia, 75 percent of murder victims had a criminal past, and in Newark it was 86 percent. Finally, in Milwaukee, 77 percent of homicide victims were found to have had an average of nearly 12 arrests. Although it has been known for some time that many murder victims have criminal records, the current levels are surprising even to analysts who study homicides (Johnson, 2007). The fact that most murder victims in large cities are criminals has remained largely off the radar. However, the impact in many of these cities has been mind-numbing to the point that the slaying of truly innocent victims gets very little reaction because people are so anesthetized to murder.

Theories of Criminal Behavior Relevant to Social Work LO 2

In his bestselling book, *The Gift of Fear*, security specialist Gavin de Becker wrote:

Though our experiences as children will affect much of what we do, a violent history does not ensure a violent future. . . . The boy who suffers violence . . . might grow up to help people avoid violence. . . . The boy whose father is killed by robbers might grow up to be a Secret Service agent. . . . Unfortunately, many children of violence will contribute something else to our nation: more violence—against their children, against their wives, against you or me. . . . When you can find no other common ground . . . remember that the vast majority of violent people started as you did, felt what you felt, wanted what you wanted. (1997, pp. 52–53)

De Becker's insights raise an age-old question: Why do some people commit crimes, whereas others do not? Social workers need to be familiar with the various answers to this question. The reason that is most accepted by society at a given time inevitably determines how the criminal justice system treats offenders.

Individualistic Theories Table 13.1 summarizes some of the theories that have been proposed to explain criminal behavior. Individualistic theories tend to be the most popular. They see criminals not as societal victims, but instead

Table 13.1 Theories about Why Some People Commit Crimes and Others Do Not

Theory	Action Implication
Individualistic Theories	
Defiance Theory First proposed by Cesare Beccaria, the father of criminology, in the late 1700s. People who do not associate certain, swift, and severe punishment with criminal activity will choose crime. <i>Underlying Assumption:</i> We all have a free will and are responsible for our actions.	Swift and severe punishment must be exacted, even for minor crimes. Example: In some countries where lawmakers apparently accept defiance theory, legal authorities cut off the hand of a person caught stealing.
Major Point: Criminals willfully choose crime.	
Biological Determinism First proposed by Cesare Lombroso in 1876. Criminals are genetic misfits or throwbacks to a more primitive, violent time. They may have an extremely low IQ or a biochemical imbalance. <i>Underlying Assumption:</i> Criminal tendencies are atavistic and inborn.	Lock them up indefinitely. Rehabilitation is not possible.
Major Point: Criminals cannot help themselves; they are destined to be violent and commit crimes.	
Psychological Determinism First popularized in the 1920s. Defects of the mind are the cause of all misbehavior, including crime. <i>Underlying Assumption:</i> Internal forces, beyond the offender's control, determine destiny.	Criminal offenders should be housed in secure mental health facilities—some for life, others for whatever length of time necessary for them to be rehabilitated through therapy.
Major Point: Criminals either have a mental illness or they are psychopaths; in other words, in Freudian terms, their superego/conscience failed to develop.	
Sociological Theories	
Social Disorganization, the Subcultural Hypothesis, and Cultural Transmission The roots of these theories come from the nineteenth-century French sociologist/philosopher Emile Durkheim. Criminals emerge from poverty-stricken, deviant, and delinquent subcultures that have rejected the values of mainstream society. Criminal values and actions are passed from one generation to the next.	Eliminate poverty. Prisons and prison personnel must model a positive and supportive environment for prisoners. Offer legitimate educational opportunities and job skills to offenders so that when they return to the outside world, they will have the means to access mainstream society's reward system.

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