

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

Theory	Action Implication
Underlying Assumptions: The poverty conditions of a geographic area, not the people who live there, are responsible for crime. However, if people live there long enough, they begin to share similar values, such as using violence as an accepted means to solve problems. Criminal behavior is learned. Major Point: If the conditions of the geographic area are changed, people will have no reason to turn to crime. Otherwise, people living in poverty must either accept their fate and work hard to gain little, or reject a classist society's values and resort to crime.	

Source: McGuire (2004); Pratt, Cullen, Blevins, Daigle & Madensen (2007); Sampson & Coles (1989)

as responsible individuals who must be punished. Individualistic theories require society to do very little and to change nothing. **Deterrence theory**, using punishment to discourage people from committing crimes, and biological determinism are more punitive than behaviorist theories and psychological determinism, but all four locate the root cause of criminal behavior within the perpetrator of the crime.

Sociological Theories By contrast, sociological explanations of criminal behavior hold individuals accountable but also suggest that society and prison environments need to change. Structural problems such as poverty, inequality, constrained residential patterns, and institutionalized racism (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4), rather than personal, psychological, or biological problems, are viewed as the root causes of criminal behavior (De Coster, Heimer, & Witrock, 2006). The findings from the De Coster et al. study (p. 751) suggest that "violent delinquency is largely a product of family disadvantage, community disadvantage, weakened family bonds, and exposure to some elements of a criminogenic street milieu." In other words, the evidence suggested that people of color and disadvantaged families have fewer residential choices and are more likely to live in neighborhoods that provide opportunities for, and even encourage, youth to commit acts of violence.

In a Texas study, violent female prisoners were more likely than non-violent female prisoners to be African American, come from single-parent households, and to have been the victims of sexual abuse (Pollock, Mullings, & Crouch, 2006). Perhaps the most telling example of racism in the criminal justice system is the fact that police response time is faster, effort exerted stronger, and follow-up more rigorous when the crime victims are white (Howerton, 2007). Studies such as these provide compelling evidence that institutionalized racism, poverty, and economic inequality breed criminals. There is a need for programs in low-income neighborhoods to help

Box 13.1 What Do You Think?

Do you believe that institutionalized racism and poverty may be root causes of criminal behavior? Why?

children stay in school and provide parents with economic opportunities and jobs.

At the end of the twentieth century, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling proposed the broken window theory, which views criminal behavior as a function of social context (Gladwell, 2000). The idea is that the level of crime committed in an urban area is correlated with the number of broken windows. The theory suggests that neighborhoods in which police tolerate misdemeanors are most likely to have high rates of felony-level crimes. A **misdemeanor** is the least serious type of crime, usually punishable by a fine or a combination of a fine and less than one year of incarceration. According to the broken window theory, changing the context will eliminate or radically reduce the criminal behavior. It suggests that focusing on little things in the environment is more effective than trying to directly fix the problems of institutionalized racism and poverty.

To test the broken window theory, Kelling and Sousa (2001) isolated four variables—unemployment, population of male teenagers, usage of crack cocaine, and enforcement of laws related to minor crimes or misdemeanors—in order to determine whether they were associated with the 60 percent decrease in crime in 78 New York City precincts during the 1990s. Their only consistent and significant finding was a strong negative correlation between the enforcement of laws against minor crimes and the overall crime rate, including the most violent crimes such as murder and rape. In other words, in places where minor laws were being enforced, the overall crime rate was lower. Surprisingly, in the 78 precincts studied there was no association between the crime rate and unemployment, a large population of male teenagers, or the use of crack cocaine. In fact, crime decreased the most in some of the precincts with the highest unemployment rates.

When Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor of New York in 1994, he used the broken window theory to implement a crime prevention strategy. Police officers and prosecutors were required to aggressively enforce misdemeanor laws against defacing property with graffiti, approaching cars and demanding money for washing windshields, turnstile jumping in subways, urinating in the street, and engaging in other petty street crimes. The Kelling and Sousa study is at least partial evidence that Giuliani's crime prevention strategy may have contributed to a substantial decrease in crime during the 1990s.

Theories and Social Work The person-in-environment and systems theory frameworks require social workers to consider both individual and sociological factors. Some criminals are sociopaths or psychopaths; some have mental illnesses; and some have grown up in areas of extreme poverty and rampant violence. Others meet none of these criteria. Social workers must remain open to all explanations that seem applicable.