5.S: Deviance, Crime, and Social Control (Summary)

Summary

1. Deviance is behavior that violates social norms and arouses negative reactions. What is considered deviant depends on the circumstances in which it occurs and varies by location and time period.

2. Durkheim said deviance performs several important functions for society. It clarifies social norms, strengthens social bonds, and can lead to beneficial social change.

3. Biological explanations of deviance assume that deviants differ biologically from nondeviants. Psychological explanations of deviance assume that deviants have a psychological problem that produces their deviance.

4. Sociological theories emphasize different aspects of the social environment as contributors to deviance and crime.

5. Crime in the United States remains a serious problem that concerns the public. Public opinion about crime does not always match reality and is related to individuals’ gender and race among other social characteristics. Women and African Americans are especially likely to be afraid of crime.

6. Crime is difficult to measure, but the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), and self-report studies give us a fairly accurate picture of the amount of crime and of its correlates.

7. Several types of crime exist. Conventional crime includes violent and property offenses and worries Americans more than any other type of crime. Such crime tends to be intraracial, and a surprising amount of violent crime is committed by people known by the victim. White-collar crime is more harmful than conventional crime in terms of personal harm and financial harm. Victimless crime is very controversial, as it involves behavior by consenting adults. Scholars continue to debate whether the nation is better or worse off with laws against victimless crimes.

8. To reduce crime, most criminologists say that a law-enforcement approach is not enough and that more efforts aimed at crime prevention are needed. These efforts include attempts to improve schools and living conditions in inner cities and programs aimed at improving nutrition and parenting for the children who are at high risk for impairment to their cognitive and social development.
Using Sociology

Imagine that you are a member of your state legislature. As a sociology major in college, you learned that the get-tough approach to crime, involving harsher criminal sentencing and the increased use of incarceration, costs much money and is not very effective in reducing crime. A bill comes before the legislature that would double the minimum prison term for several types of violent crime. You realize that this change in policy would probably do little to reduce the crime rate and eventually cost millions of dollars in increased incarceration costs, but you also recognize that if you vote against the bill, your opponent in the upcoming election will charge that you are soft on crime. Do you vote for or against the bill? Why? Regardless of your vote, what else would you do as a state legislator to try to reduce the crime rate? How would your efforts relate to a sociological understanding of crime and deviance?