7.7A: Crime

Crime is the breach of rules or laws for which some governing authority can ultimately prescribe a conviction.

Learning Objectives

- Relate cultural change to changing definitions of crime

Key Points

- While every crime violates the law, not every violation of the law counts as a crime. Breaches of contract and of other civil law may rank as “offenses” or as “infractions.” Torts are wrongs against private parties that can give rise to a civil cause of action.
- In sociology, a normative definition views crime as deviant behavior that violates prevailing norms, or cultural standards prescribing how humans ought to behave normally.
- Criminalization is a procedure deployed by society as a pre-emptive, harm-reduction device, using the threat of punishment as a deterrent to anyone proposing to engage in the behavior causing harm.
- As cultures change and the political environment shifts, societies may criminalize or decriminalize certain behaviors, which directly affects crime statistics and social perception of crime and deviant behavior.
- Criminology is the scientific study of the nature, extent, causes, and control of criminal behavior in both the individual and in society.
- Crime statistics refers to the collection and calculation on data on crime in a given location.
- Criminology is the scientific study of the nature, extent, causes, and control of criminal behavior in both the individual and in society.
Key Terms

- **criminalization**: The act of making a previously legal activity illegal.
- **Deviant Behavior**: The violation of prevailing norms or cultural standards prescribing how humans ought to behave.
- **Breaches of Contract**: An action in which a binding agreement or bargained-for exchange is not honored by one or more of the parties to the contract by non-performance or interference with the other party’s performance.

Crime is the breach of rules or laws for which some governing authority can ultimately prescribe a conviction. Crimes may also result in cautions, rehabilitation, or be unenforced. Individual human societies may each define crime and crimes differently, in different localities, and at different time stages of the crime. While every crime violates the law, not every violation of the law counts as a crime; for example, breaches of contract and of other civil law may rank as “offenses” or as “infractions.” Modern societies generally regard crimes as offenses against the public or the state, as distinguished from torts, which are wrongs against private parties that can give rise to a civil cause of action.

In sociology, a normative definition views crime as deviant behavior that violates prevailing norms, or cultural standards prescribing how humans ought to behave normally. This approach considers the complex realities surrounding the concept of crime and seeks to understand how changing social, political, psychological, and economic conditions may affect changing definitions of crime and the form of the legal, law-enforcement, and penal responses made by society.

These structural realities remain fluid and often contentious. For example: as cultures change and the political environment shifts, societies may criminalize or decriminalize certain behaviors, which directly affects the statistical crime rates, influences the allocation of resources for the enforcement of laws, and re-influences the general public opinion. One can view criminalization as a procedure deployed by society as a pre-emptive, harm-reduction device, using the threat of punishment as a deterrent to anyone proposing to engage in the behavior causing harm. The state becomes involved because governing entities can become convinced that the costs of not criminalizing, through allowing the harms to continue unabated, outweigh the costs of criminalizing it, restricting individual liberty, for example, to minimize harm to others.

Similarly, changes in the collection and calculation of data on crime may affect the public perceptions of the extent of any given “crime problem.” All such adjustments to crime statistics, together with the experience of people in their everyday lives, shape attitudes on the extent to which the state should use law or social engineering to enforce or encourage any particular social norm. Criminology is the scientific study of the nature, extent, causes, and control of criminal behavior in both the individual and in society.