

## WHY PEOPLE COMMIT CRIMES: IT IS NOT THAT SIMPLE?

---

**Annika Narang\***

### ABSTRACT

Criminal behaviour is a complex web, which is woven by a combination of individual traits, social influences and environmental factors. There is no single reason as to why a person commits a crime. This paper delves into these influences using the lens of criminal psychology. It examines how individual traits like psychopathy, low self-control and difficult temperaments can increase the risk of crimes. Social influences like economic hardship and disadvantaged neighbourhoods are also explored. Concepts like the opportunity theory and broken windows theory are also briefly discussed to cover the aspect of environmental factors. We also talk about the future of criminal justice with the unexpected alliance of AI and forensic psychology. This paper contends that one can move beyond the stereotypes and focus on prevention, better law enforcement strategies, and a justice system that focuses on rehabilitation. This can lead to safer communities and a just society.

### INTRODUCTION

Criminal behaviour has fascinated humanity for centuries. One always finds themselves questioning, “Why do people commit crimes?” The answer to this question, however, is not simple. Criminal psychology focuses on understanding criminal behaviour and not only examines its causes but also works towards its prevention. We cannot find one single reason for the causation of crime; one needs to follow a multi-faceted approach. Crime is rarely the result of a single factor; rather, it often emerges from a confluence of biological, psychological, and social influences.

This paper will take a holistic approach instead of focusing on one single influence. We will examine the role of individual psychology, social influences, and environmental factors in shaping criminal thinking and actions.

---

\*BBA LLB, SECOND YEAR, NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY ODISHA.

## INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

Research suggests three major personality traits are linked to an increased risk of criminal behaviour: psychopathy, low self-control, and difficult temperament.<sup>1</sup>

**Psychopathy:** Studies by Gartner and Nigel suggest psychopaths are more likely to commit certain types of crimes, particularly those fueled by personal gain rather than anger. It's as if they're playing a game, and you're just a pawn on the board.

The dominant view posits psychopathy as an inborn condition with a strong genetic component. Potentially, adverse childhood experiences like abuse or neglect can exacerbate this underlying predisposition. This combination can lead to impaired decision-making and social functioning. They may struggle to understand social cues or the consequences of their actions, making them more susceptible to criminal activity. Shockingly, research shows a higher prevalence of these traits in prison populations compared to the general public. This doesn't necessarily mean all psychopaths become criminals, but the combination of personality traits and life experiences can increase the risk.

Based on the Big Five Model of Personality, it has been suggested by scholars that psychopathy is a mix of traits. High extraversion indicates a desire for excitement, while low conscientiousness reflects a disregard for rules. Low agreeableness signifies a lack of empathy and cooperation. Neuroticism is complex, with psychopaths appearing calm (low anxiety) but prone to impulsivity and hostility (high neuroticism in this context). This explains why psychopathic criminals might commit a wider variety of crimes and recidivists faster.<sup>2</sup>

**Low Self-Control:** We've all experienced that voice in our heads telling us to do something we know isn't right. People with low self-control often have a hard time resisting these urges. They might prioritize short-term desires over long-term consequences. Imagine seeing a friend shoplift and thinking, "Why not?" – that's the kind of thinking low self-control can fuel.

Research by Boccio and colleagues (2016) suggests people with low self-control tend to be impulsive and irresponsible. They might be drawn to excitement and thrills, sometimes taking

---

<sup>1</sup> Tharshini NK and others, 'The Link between Individual Personality Traits and Criminality: A Systematic Review' (2021) 18 International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 8663

<sup>2</sup> Kendra Cherry Mse, 'What Are the Big 5 Personality Traits?' (Verywell Mind, 11 March 2023) <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-big-five-personality-dimensions-2795422> accessed 22 June 2024

risks without considering the potential consequences. This can lead them down a dangerous path, like stealing or engaging in other risky behaviour.

### **Difficult Temperament**

A person's early life greatly influences who they end up being. Kids who exhibit traits of negativity, frequent tantrums, and trouble developing relationships—all indicative of a "difficult temperament"—may be significantly more likely to experience issues in the future. A young person who struggles to appropriately communicate their feelings may become irrationally angry and irritated. This can lead them in the wrong direction.

Research conducted in 2017 by Foulds and associates indicates that these temperamental variations may play a role in crime and violence, especially in the adolescent years. Regrettably, adverse childhood experiences such as maltreatment or disregard may intensify these challenges. Studies indicate a connection between these kinds of experiences and emotional regulation issues, which might have negative consequences.

### **SOCIAL INFLUENCES**

An individual can easily be influenced by the social circles they are surrounded by and the level of economic hardship they face. Studies reveal that living in areas with high crime rates or struggling financially can also lead to an increase in the risk of criminal activity. It is likely because of the extreme stress and anxiety associated with poverty and the lack of opportunities it presents, which might push an individual to take desperate measures.<sup>3</sup>

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods often grapple with a complex set of challenges that can exacerbate social disorder. Economic difficulties, limited access to essential services, and low educational attainment create an environment where crime can flourish.

The absence of robust community structures further amplifies these problems. Without effective mechanisms to address residents' needs and concerns, a vicious cycle emerges. High crime rates become a significant source of stress, pushing residents to avoid using streets and

---

<sup>3</sup> Walden University, 'What Influences Criminal Behavior' (Walden University, 2024) <https://www.waldenu.edu/online-bachelors-programs/bs-in-criminal-justice/resource/what-influences-criminal-behavior> accessed 22 June 2024.

public spaces and shunning social activities. Anxiety and hypervigilance are two common mental health problems that arise from this widespread worry.

When people are confined to their homes and become isolated, they lose their social ties with their neighbours. This social isolation weakens the informal social control mechanisms inside the society. Fear-stricken locals might be less inclined to confront offenders or report strange activity. This lack of participation creates a void that allows more criminal activities to grow. Essentially, neighbourhood violence is fueled by stress, loneliness, and a weakened sense of community spirit, and it eventually gets out of control.

This emphasizes how important it is to address the primary causes of misconduct in regions where it is inhibited. By investing in social services, job growth, and education, we can help create a safer and encouraging atmosphere. Encouraging community engagement and involvement through projects can also assist locals in taking charge of their neighbourhoods and fortifying social bonds. We must end this cycle of fear and isolation if we want communities to grow safer and more vibrant.

## ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

Why does crime seem to be a bigger problem in some neighbourhoods than in others? It's not as easy as pointing fingers at the solution. It resembles a complex web made of many strands.

**The Opportunity Theory:** Imagine strolling along a street lined with deserted buildings and flickering lights. According to opportunity theory, this might present a great opportunity for crime. If something looks like it would be simple to get away with, some people may become more tempted. Because of this, maintaining abandoned buildings, implementing active community watch programs, and installing enough street lighting can all have an impact.

**Broken Windows and Broken Spirits:** According to the broken windows theory, overt behaviours such as graffiti and broken windows might convey the idea that "nobody cares." Imagine strolling through a neighbourhood coated in spray paint; you might get the impression that everything goes there. This might make thieves feel more confident and deter locals from getting involved. However, places that are well-kept and have a strong feeling of community deter crime and foster a sense of ownership.

These theories serve as a reminder that crime is more than just a matter of personal decision-making. One major factor is the environment. A person's behaviour can be influenced by their neighbourhood's design, the available resources, and the general feeling of community.

### **A MULTIFACETED APPROACH**

One should look at it as a maze, not a monster. Criminal behaviour is not a singular, easily identifiable antagonist, but it is a complex web woven from many threads. Personality traits, social influences, and life experiences, each strand play a role in shaping why someone takes a wrong turn. To truly understand crime, we need to move beyond stereotypes and take a look into this multifaceted reality.

**Catching Them Before They Start:** By understanding why people commit crimes, we can potentially stop them before the crimes happen. Take the case of a teenager struggling with anger management. Recognizing this as a risk factor allows us to offer support and anger management tools, potentially preventing future problems.

**Cracking the Case, Not Just the Suspect:** Understanding criminal behaviour helps the police in several ways. Imagine a rash of break-ins, by analysing suspect personalities and crime scene details, they could create a profile to narrow down the search. Studying behavioural patterns can also help predict where crime might occur, allowing for targeted patrols. Knowing how criminals think can even guide questioning techniques and confession strategies.

**Justice Beyond Bars:** The benefits extend to the justice system. Judges can make more informed sentencing decisions, considering the underlying factors and the potential for rehabilitation. Risk assessment tools can be refined to predict who is most likely to do it again and direct them towards appropriate programs. This holistic approach paves the way for a more just and effective system.

### **MOVING BEYOND LABELS: THE POWER OF CHANGE**

Criminal psychology is mostly about busting the myth of the "criminal stereotype." Not everyone who makes a mistake fits into a certain kind. People are unique individuals shaped by their entirely different experiences. What might lead one person down the forbidden path might not affect another in the same way.

People can change. A teenager who gets in trouble, if given the right support and resources, might lead to reforms and their life could head in a new direction. Only looking at fixed things like childhood experiences does not give us the full picture. It is important to realise that positive change and rehabilitation are possible. By breaking stereotypes and embracing a broader view of crime, we can build a future that focuses more on reforms and support.

**AI and the Future of Justice:**<sup>4</sup> Imagine a courtroom that is not just about human drama but is now a high-tech space where cutting-edge technology joins hands with forensic psychology for justice. It is not a fantasy rather it is the direction that criminal justice is headed in, courtesy of the unexpected partnership of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and forensic psychology.

**Understanding the Mind of Crime: Forensic Psychology:** Forensic psychology is not about trying to read minds. It is about figuring out how law and human behaviour intersect. It dives into why people commit crimes, how crime affects victims, whether eyewitnesses can be trusted, mental health evaluations, and more. In court, forensic psychologists share insights that can sway justice.

**The Power of AI: A Brainy New Partner:** AI acts like a supercharged helper here. It can go through loads of data fast to spot hidden patterns even expert detectives might miss. This opens up exciting possibilities like predicting risks to stop crimes before they happen, checking the reliability of eyewitnesses against facts, making mental health evaluations more objective, and analyzing crime scenes automatically.

**Walking the Ethical Tightrope:** While AI and forensic psychology make an impressive team, there are a few challenges ahead. Making sure algorithms don't favour anyone unfairly or rely too much on machines in delicate legal matters is important for maintaining trust in the system. Keeping AI transparent, accountable, and rooted in humanity should be the key focus.

**A Brighter Future for Justice:** The blend of AI and forensic psychology is not only about new technology. It is about making justice more efficient, accurate, and fair. Combining top AI with human skills means we are heading towards a future where justice is smart as well as blindfolded. As technology evolves, this important collaboration has huge potential to

---

<sup>4</sup> Adelstein L, 'Ai and Forensic Psychology : A Partnership for the Future' (Medium, 1 August 2023) <https://medium.com/@adelstein/ai-and-forensic-psychology-a-partnership-for-the-future-599da307452> accessed 22 June 2024

transform how we handle criminal cases by bringing together efficient tools to ensure that fairness prevails throughout.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, by diving deep into what makes people commit crimes, understanding their social environment, and taking a look at the circumstances around crime scenes, criminal psychology helps us see why things happen as they do. Because of this knowledge, we get the power to stop crimes from happening, give better law enforcement strategies and keep areas safe by building smart patrolling plans and simultaneously building up a justice system that focuses on helping people turn their lives around. When we realise the various reasons why a person commits a crime and believes in reformation, that is when we will truly see a fairer society ahead.

