

# **Sociological Theories of Crime and Delinquency**

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*This review examines the most frequently cited sociological theories of crime and delinquency. The major theoretical perspectives are presented, beginning with anomie theory and the theories associated with the Chicago School of Sociology. They are followed by theories of strain, social control, opportunity, conflict, and developmental life course. The review concludes with a conceptual map featuring the inter-relationships and contexts of the major theoretical perspectives.*

**KEYWORDS** *Crime, theory, Chicago, anomie, strain*

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the early twentieth century, theories about the causes of crime began to move away from biological and psychological causes of human behavior toward social environment explanations, such as slum life and the society at large (Gelles & Levine, 1999). The most prominent and influential sociological theories of crime and delinquency today have their roots in the schools of thought beginning at the turn of the twentieth century; most modern theories are, in essence, repackaged and polished versions of earlier theories der to explain the political and social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 1989). This literature review examines several of the major sociological theories by examining both the theories from the classical schools of thoughts and those that emerged since the 1960s.

The review begins with the two classical sociological theories of crime and delinquency: (1) the theory of anomie by Durkeim and (2) the theories known as the Chicago School, including the theorists Park and Burgess,

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Shaw and McKay, and Sutherland and, respectively, the theories of ecological analysis, cultural transmission, and differential association theory reflected in poor urban neighborhoods. Deriving from the theory of anomie, the review also focuses on the theories of strain theory, delinquent subcultures, and opportunity theory based on the works of Merton, Cohen, and Cloward and Ohlin, respectively. Also originating from the theory of anomie is the theory of control that helps explain the violence and conflict of the 1960s and 1970s (Hirschi, 1969). In addition to control theory, the review includes conflict theories developed by Marx, Vold, Dahrendorf, and Turk. The review concludes with the most recent theoretical contributions stemming from developmental life course theories and a conceptual map that seeks to integrate the various theories.

## METHODS

The electronic database search began with *Sociological Abstracts* using the descriptors of *crime* or *delinquency*, with AND as a Boolean operator, and the title term *theor\** that yielded 1,194 references, and then added *crime*, which reduced the yield to 535 references. Criminology textbooks including *Criminology* (2001), the *Encyclopedia of Criminology* (2005), and *The Handbook of Crime and Punishment* (Tonry, 1998) were reviewed to identify the most prevalent and frequently cited theories and theorists. Using *Sociological Abstracts* and *Social Work Abstracts* databases and running searches using the descriptor *crime* with the title terms *strain theory*, *Chicago school*, *control theory*, *conflict theory*, and *developmental theory*, roughly 100 different theorists, researchers, and sub-theories appeared.

In consultation with a specialist on violence and forensic social work, Dr. Mary Cavanaugh, eight highly influential theorists were selected and compared to two sociology textbooks—*Sociology* (1999) and *The Sociology of Deviant Behavior* (Clinard & Meier, 1968)—and yielded six major theoretical perspectives. Taking into consideration the limited focus of this review, the most frequently cited theorists were selected. Only theories that are strictly sociological in nature are included; theories that incorporate psychological or biological applications or any other social science discipline are not included.

### Anomie

Much of contemporary sociological theory, especially the theoretical explanations of crime and delinquency, begins with Durkheim's classic work, *Suicide* (1951), which led to Merton's strain theory and control theories (Lilly et al., 1989). During the late 1800s, when biological theories that explained individual differences between criminals and non-criminals to explain the abnormality of crime were the norm in the scientific community, Durkheim

(1951) wrote about the normality of crime in society. He explained that human conduct and misconduct lay not in the individual but in the group and social organization.

Like Marx and Engels who preceded him, Durkheim (1964) also placed crime in the context of the division of labor and the degradation of society. However, unlike Marx and Engels, Durkheim placed the moral order as more important than the economic order as it relates to the decline of society. He viewed the division of labor as a major contributor to social differentiation and strained social relationships to the point that society could be held together only by an external entity such as the state (Clinard & American Sociological Association, 1964). According to Durkheim, simpler societies were unified by a “mechanical solidarity” where work was monotonous, conformity was the norm, and a strong, collective consciousness permeated society. These societies were also marked by “integration”: a state of cohesion, strong social bonds, and the subordination of the self to a common cause (Durkheim, 1951, p. 209). With increasing division of labor, societies became more complex and unified through “organic solidarity” based on the interdependence among individuals. These societies were marked by “regulation,” defined as the erosion of “mutual moral support,” the weakening of the “collective force of society,” and extreme individualism that led towards deviant behavior (Durkheim, 1951, pp. 209–214).

According to Durkheim (1964), in societies where the division of labor and individual differences rise to prominence, social controls weaken and lead to three abnormal forms of division of labor. Of the three abnormal forms, the predominant abnormal condition is “anomic” where there is: (1) a lack of integration of different work functions, (2) conflicts between labor and capital, and (3) increasing specializations. This leads to a failure to produce fulfilling and satisfying social relationships between members of society, ultimately leading to a state of anomie (Durkheim, 1964). By describing the breakdown of society based on the increasing division of labor and erosion of moral order, Durkheim created, in effect, the structural-functional perspective of crime (Lilly et al., 1989).

The structural-functional perspective stated that as society modernized, urbanized, and increasingly changed, the intimacy of small, traditional communities broke down. As group ties broke down alongside the decline of a common set of rules, peoples’ lives became unpredictable as society became full of inconsistencies and confusion as the interests and actions of one group came into conflict with another (Clinard & American Sociological Association., 1964). With the loss of distinct and long-established rules, the system gradually breaks down into a condition of “normlessness” and a state of anomie, and Durkheim noted that

There, the state of crisis and anomy is constant and, so to speak, normal.  
From top to bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused without knowing

where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is far beyond all it can attain. Reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations; reality is therefore abandoned, but so too is possibility abandoned when it in turn becomes reality. A thirst arises for the novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known. Henceforth one has no strength to endure the least reverse. The whole fever subsides and the sterility of all the tumult is apparent, and it is seen that all these new sensations in their infinite quantity cannot form a solid foundation of happiness to support one during days of trial (Durkheim, 1951, p. 256).

### Slums and the Chicago School

Like Durkheim, the scholars at the University of Chicago and their theories about the roots of crime in the 1920s were heavily influenced by the time and place in which they were formed. Surrounded by a growing city and exploding population of the urban poor, the Chicago School believed that the causes of crime were primarily entrenched in one area of American society—the city slums—and people became criminal by learning deviant cultural norms and values (Short, 2002). Rejecting the social Darwinism of the time, criminologists in the Chicago School rejected crime as a matter of individual pathology; they viewed crime as a social problem in which the poor were driven by their environment into a life of crime due to criminal values' replacing conventional ones and being transmitted from one generation to the next (Short). The breakdown of social bonds, associations, and social controls in families, neighborhoods, and communities resulted in what Chicago scholars Thomas and Znaniecki (1958) termed “social disorganization.”

Park and Burgess expanded the study of social disorganization by introducing ecological analysis or the study of the interrelationships of people and their environment. Park and Burgess (1936) studied the geographic locations of high crime rates rather than criminals and developed the notion that urban development is patterned socially and develops naturally in concentric zones. Five zones were outlined, each with its own structure, organization, and culture, spreading outward from a “central business district” toward the “commuters zone.” Notable among the zones was the “zone of transition” in which deteriorating housing, constant displacement of residents, and the influx of immigrants weakened family and communal ties and resulted in social disorganization, and later, crime (Park, 1936).

### Cultural Transmission

Shaw and McKay (researchers at Chicago's Institute for Juvenile Research) expanded on the work of Park and Burgess and argued that the organization of a neighborhood in a city was central in the prevention of delinquency

by demonstrating how urban growth distributes people and crime spatially and how the crime rates differ among Chicago neighborhoods (Short, 2002). Shaw and McKay (1972) confirmed that delinquency was highest in the zone of transition and decreased within neighborhoods where increasing affluence corresponded with the distance from the central business district. Also, the highest rates of delinquency persisted over extended periods of time and throughout the changes in the ethnic demographics within the community. Shaw and McKay drew the conclusion that the nature of the neighborhood and the economic status and cultural values of various neighborhood types were crucial in the regulation of crime; ethnicity and the nature of the individual within the neighborhood did not determine the likelihood of crime (Shaw, Forbaugh, McKay, & Cottrell, 1929).

Shaw and McKay (1972) documented the cultural values and norms of Chicago's neighborhoods by interviewing thousands of juvenile delinquents, and that led to the conclusion that older boys were associated with younger boys in various offenses. More important, they concluded that disorganized neighborhoods enabled "criminal traditions," such as conventional values, to be "transmitted down through successive generations of boys, much the same way that language and other social forms are transmitted" (Shaw & McKay, 1972, p. 174). This research led Shaw and McKay to formulate the concept of cultural transmission in disorganized urban areas describing "the existence of a coherent system of values supporting delinquent acts," where socially learned behaviors were transmitted from one generation to the next (Shaw & McKay, p. 173).

### Differential Association Theory

Sutherland and Cressey (1955) built on the Shaw and McKay observation about the transmission of delinquent values from one generation to the next whereby crime is learned through social interaction by noting the importance of "differential social organization" to account for the observation that social groups are arranged differently (some organized in support of criminal activity and others organized against it). Sutherland advanced the theory that criminal behavior is learned through social interactions wherein opportunities that are favorable to the violation of the law differs from opportunities that are unfavorable to violation of the law for someone who embraces crime as an acceptable way of life (Sutherland & Cressey). Sutherland (1949) described this theory as "differential association."

Sutherland (1949) maintained that his theories of differential association and differential social organization were compatible and together formed a comprehensive explanation of crime. Differential association explained why any given individual was drawn into crime; differential social disorganization explained why rates of crime were higher in certain sectors of American society. Deviance was the result of socialization and learning values of a

subculture that supports attitudes and behaviors that the mainstream culture rejects (Sutherland & Cressey, 1955). Most provocatively, Sutherland's theory applied to all strata of society and was able to account for the offenses "committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation" (1949, p. 9). In describing crimes committed in the areas of business, politics, and the professions, Sutherland coined the term *white-collar crime*.

### Anomie Revisited

Merton (1968) rejected the view that crime emanated from city slums and learned deviant cultural values. Instead, he noted that conformity to conventional cultural values produced high rates of crime and deviance. Merton agreed with Durkheim's view that the biological perspective provided inadequate explanations on deviance and that when institutionalized norms weaken and anomie takes hold in societies by placing an intense value on economic success, it became clear that anomie was not created by sudden social change (Lilly et al., 1989). Merton posited that social structural conditions should be considered as factors that induce deviance. Social systems hold the same goals for all people without giving the same people the equal means to achieve them. According to Merton, when this occurs, standards of right and wrong are no longer applicable, and it is necessary to determine "which of the available procedures is most efficient in netting the culturally approved value?" (Merton, p. 189) The state of anomie results in "a literal *demoralization*, i.e., a de-institutionalization of the means" (Merton, p. 190) that is a result of "the acute pressures created by the discrepancy between culturally induced goals and socially structured opportunities" (Merton, p. 232).

### Strain Theory

Against the backdrop of the macro-state of anomie, Merton analyzed the individual patterns and means to achieve society's set goals during anomic conditions by identifying five types of adjustment. Merton (1968, p. 194) refers to these five types of adjustment to anomic conditions as "modes of individual adaptation": *conformity*, the most common mode, the acceptance of both cultural goals and institutionalized means; *retreatism*, a deviant alternative that rejects the goals and means of society; *rebellion*, an uncommon deviant alternative that rejects and actively substitutes the goals and means of society; *ritualism*, the means to legitimately guarantee that the cultural goals are respected even though the goals themselves are not realistic; and *innovation*, a form of acceptance of the goals but rejection of the means.

Innovation has received the most scholarly attention in the study of crime and delinquency, and Merton (1968) describes innovation as the way

of defining most criminal behavior. In this way, the bulk of criminal behavior would be seen as the condition that “occurs when the individual has assimilated the cultural emphasis . . . without equally internalizing the institutional norms governing ways and means for its attainment” (Merton, p. 195). Such criminal behavior and corresponding differentiation among modes of adaptation is not uniform across society; Merton felt that “the absence of realistic opportunities for advancement . . . results in the greatest pressures towards deviation exerted upon the lower strata” (pp. 198–199).

It is important to understand the differences between anomie and the structural situation of blocked opportunities that can lead to corresponding modes of adaptation, such as innovation (Featherstone & Deflem, 2003). In essence, anomie occurs when society emphasizes achievement or culturally prescribed goals without addressing the approved norms that regulate the means to achieve those goals. Strain theory provides an explanation of how anomie results in deviance that reflects different modes of individual adaptation (Featherstone & Deflem). According to Merton (1968), the relationship between anomie and strain theory can be seen in the following observation, “A cardinal American virtue [is] ‘ambition’ [and it] promotes a cardinal American vice [of] ‘deviant behavior’” (p. 200).

### Delinquent Subcultures

Sutherland’s differential association theory and Merton’s strain theory were consolidated and expanded by Cohen (1955) to explain how delinquent subcultures arise, where they are located within the social structure, and how they can be defined. Cohen noted that the subcultures emerge primarily in urban slum areas that support crime that is “non-utilitarian, malicious, and negativistic” and often committed “for the hell of it” (pp. 25–26). He noted that the roots of delinquent subcultures lie in the class differences in parental aspirations, child-rearing practices, and classroom expectations.

Lower-class youths are drawn toward delinquent subcultures and gangs often as a result of being “denied status in the respectable society because they cannot meet the criteria of the respectable status system” (Cohen, 1955, p. 121). More important, the lower the position of a child’s family in the social structure, the higher the amount of problems that the child will most likely encounter later in life. For instance, lower-class families may not have access to the socialization patterns, values, and education of the middle class. Cohen speaks of delinquent youths as coming from unfortunate backgrounds and embracing values that provide both the chance to gain the status and the satisfaction of rejecting respectable (middle-class) values that lie outside their reach. Moreover, delinquent subcultures reflect a “reaction formation” to establish “criteria of status which these children can meet” (Cohen, pp. 121, 133). This process includes rejecting the middle-class goals and norms that they have been taught to desire (by which they are judged inadequate)

and replacing those middle-class standards with a set of oppositional values to gain status, respect, and worth (Shoemaker, 1996). Last, these subcultures can be transmitted across generations as a result of continuous discontent with one's status and the lure of alternative forms of attainable values, worth, and success (Cohen).

### Opportunity Theory

Like Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin were former students of Merton and Sutherland, respectively, and thus incorporated and expanded on both differential association theory and strain theory. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) built on the work of Merton and Cohen by advancing the idea that youths in slum areas lacked the legitimate means and opportunities to be successful and acquire status. They also expanded on Sutherland's work on cultural transmission and concluded that criminal behavior depended upon access to requisite illegitimate means. However, unlike Cohen who stated that delinquent subcultures take on values that are oppositional to those of the main culture, Cloward and Ohlin suggested that lower-class delinquents are proactive and goal-oriented by seizing available opportunities even though most of them are illegitimate.

According to Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) opportunity theory, delinquent subcultures emerge and persist in lower-class areas where there are enough youths to band together and support one another against their remoteness and estrangement from conventional values, in pursuit of illegitimate opportunities that exceed the number of legitimate opportunities for success. As illegitimate opportunities for success are distributed through society as unevenly as the legitimate opportunities for success, the types of delinquent subcultures are determined by the type of neighborhood and illegitimate opportunities available (Shoemaker, 1996). Shoemaker states that neighborhoods that are stable and share conventional and unconventional systems are marked by *criminal/theft gangs*; neighborhoods characterized by transience, instability, and an absence of criminal organizations are marked by *conflict/violent gangs*; and neighborhoods that could be either type but wherein members have not been successful in both the legitimate and illegitimate worlds are marked by *retreatist/drug-user gangs*.

### Social Control Theories

Among the multiple theories of social control, the one developed by Hirschi, beginning in his 1969 seminal book on the causes of delinquency, is highly influential. In his critique of various social theories and the development of his own theory rooted in the historical and turbulent times of the 1960s (Lilly et al., 1989), Hirschi challenged the school of strain theory related to anomie and the breakdown of social ties by suggesting that "Durkheim's theory



is one of the purest examples of control theory: both anomie and egoism are conditions of 'deregulation' and the 'aberrant' behavior that follows is an automatic consequence" (1969, p. 3). In contrast to previous control theorists who focused on an individual's incentive to commit delinquent acts, Hirschi explored the reasons why people did not engage in criminal behavior and what explained conformity and adherence to rules (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). In contrast to an emphasis on internal factors and related to personality, he addressed external factors related to sustaining social relationships, that he called "*social bonds*" (1969, p. 17).

Hirschi (1969) identified four social bonds to explain conformity—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—that are external in nature and tie people to conventional society wherein these bonds involve conventional activities, behavior, and conduct (Hirschi). First, the *attachment* bond relates to family, school, and peers. For families, the strength of the bond between parent and child is seen as the main deterrent to delinquent behavior and the mechanism for inculcating conventional norms and values. For the school, the ability to perform well in school is linked to delinquency such that poor academic performance begins a chain of disrespect for the school, teachers, staff and, later, authority as a whole. For peers, loyalty and solidarity are important characteristics of delinquent behaviors and personal sacrifice for the "requirements of the group" (Hirschi, 1969, p. 145). Second, *commitment* is the degree to which the individual's self-interest in a set of activities connects the individual to society's moral code. Conventional aspirations, such as those relating to employment or education, are viewed as "constraints on delinquency" and "stakes in conformity" in that the greater the aspiration and personal investment, the greater the tie to the conventional social order and the less likely the involvement in delinquent activities (Hirschi, p. 162). Third, *involvement* relates to the amount of time and energy devoted to a particular set of activities, such as homework that reflects the values of conventional society. Fourth, *belief* is the degree of approval and consent to certain values and norms of a society. Beliefs are moral positions that need constant social reinforcement; in essence, the less people believe that laws are just, the more likely the interest in delinquent behavior. When considering all the bonds in relationship to deviant behavior, Hirschi pointed out that "The chain of causation is thus from attachment to parents, through concern for the approval of persons in positions of authority, to belief that the rules of society are binding on one's conduct" (p. 200).

## Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists sought new ways to view crime in reaction to the social and political turmoil of the 1960s and the inability of such phenomena to be adequately explained by existing theories (Adler, Mueller, & Laufer, 2001). As

such, conflict theory questions traditional values and views laws as existing to maintain the interests of specific groups who hold political power. Conflict theory is primarily concerned with the concept of power and has its roots in rebellion, class conflict, and the philosophy of Marxism (Shoemaker, 1990).

The theoretical foundation of conflict theory was laid down by Marx and his philosophies regarding the vast differences in power between groups, the conflicts inherent in the social arrangement between groups under capitalism, and the violent confrontations between social classes (Marx, Engels, & Struik, 1971). Like Durkheim, Marx (1848) viewed crime as a symptom of social decline and the political state as a mechanism for the perpetuation of capitalism, which was at the root of crime. As Turner (1975) explains, the basic assumptions of Marx's theoretical approach can be stated broadly in six conceptual stages:

1. Although social systems reveal interdependence of certain units and groups, these interrelations always reveal conflicts of interest.
2. These conflicts of interest are the result of the unequal distribution of scarce resources, particularly power. Such distributions of resources and conflicts exist in all societies.
3. Latent conflicts of interest will eventually lead to overt and violent conflict among social groups in a system.
4. These conflicts will eventually lead to the dominant and subjugated segments of a system's becoming polarized.
5. The more polarized the dominant and subjugated, the more violent the ensuing conflict will be. The more violent the conflict, the greater will be the structural change of the system and the redistribution of scarce resources.
6. This reorganization once again creates conditions of conflicting interest between the new dominant and subjugated classes, which will set into motion the inevitable processes of class conflict, polarization, violence, and system reorganization.

Crime is a product of conflicts over the distribution of resources and the illegitimacy of such a distribution, especially as it impacts the poor and the groups that seek to organize and bring conflict out into the open (Turner, 1975).

After Marx, the first sociologist to view crime through a conflict theory lens was Vold. Vold (1958) viewed crime as natural in that individuals express their loyalty to a group through conflict; loyalty to a group is beneficial because through collective action groups successfully enable an individual's needs to be met. An effective group survives because it serves its members' needs; if not, new groups will form to more effectively address and serve the same needs. Due to the multitude of groups in a complex society, it was logical that it would be common for interests to clash as individuals

advocated and fought for the interests of their particular group above all others. In effect, this created a constant state of conflict but one in which “the continuing ongoing of society depends” (Vold, p. 204). Vold viewed conflict as necessary to create a balance of power among conflicting forces that comprise society. As he noted, “through varying kinds of uneasy adjustment to a more or less stable equilibrium of balanced forces in opposition, the resulting condition of relative stability is what is usually called social order or social organization” (p. 204). Vold used such logic to view legal compromises, political arrests, and conflicts between union and management as criminal acts committed by those who have the power and control in society.

Dahrendorf expanded on Vold’s stance that not only does conflict between groups ensure social order but enforced constraint between groups binds people together (Adler et al., 2001). Dahrendorf (1959) states that because cultural norms always exist and are dependent upon sanctions for their adherence, certain people and therefore groups must have more power and authority than others to enforce such norms. Dahrendorf viewed conflict and class inequality as natural and inescapable facets of society as the basic unit of society involves dominance-subjection relationships (Shoemaker, 1996). Dahrendorf claimed that social inequities, social conflicts, and coercion are constant; over time, conflict leads to social change whereby the breakdown of the old social structure ushers in a new social order.

And finally, the contemporary conflict theorist Turk embraced social conflict as a basic fact of life and expanded on the theoretical contributions of Vold and Dahrendorf by demonstrating how those persons with power create laws and exercise authority to maintain their hold on power. Turk (1969) claimed that crime was not a result of conflict arising from groups vying for power but rather criminally defined behavior being ascribed to the lower status groups by those with power and authority. Crime should not be understood as “a biological, psychological, or even behavioral phenomenon, but a social status defined by the way in which an individual is perceived, evaluated, and treated by legal authorities” (Turk, 1969, p. 25). Criminal status is defined by those with power (the “authorities”) and imposed on those without power (the “subjects”; Turk). Relating back to Dahrendorf’s work and the conflict of the subordinate class against the authorities, “law-breaking, then, becomes a measure of the stability of the ruler/ruled relationship” (Turk, p. 42). Therefore, the frequency of certain crimes, the degrees to which laws are enforced, and the populations frequently affected by these laws all reflect the struggle for power in society and how the power balance is continually changing.

### Developmental Life Course Theories

Developmental life course theories are concerned with the development of offending and antisocial behavior, risk factors at different ages, and the

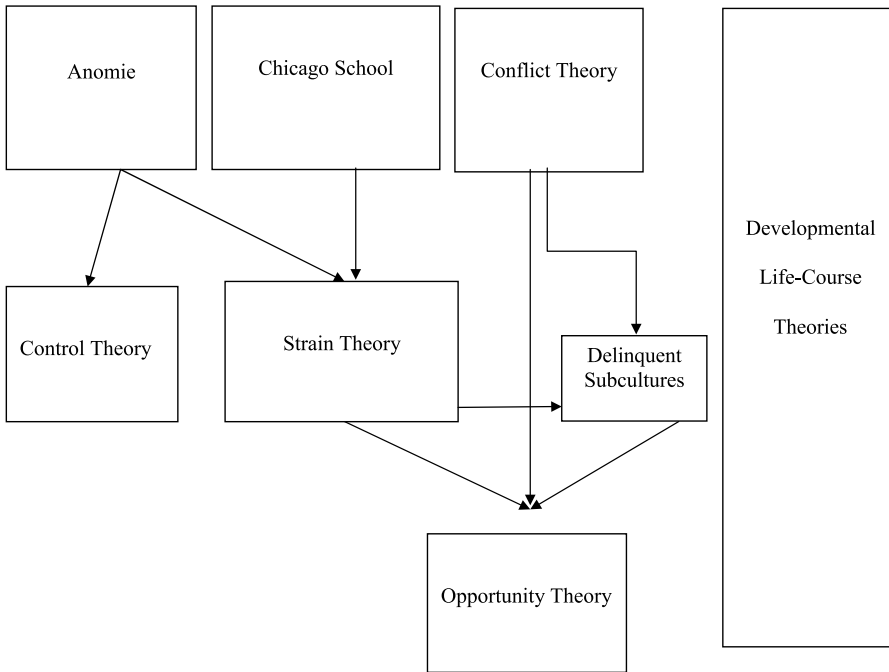
effects of life events on the course of development (Adler et al., 2001). As opposed to the crime paradigms detailed earlier, developmental life course theories are especially concerned with understanding individual changes in criminal behavior throughout the life span, especially the ways in which risk factors and life events interact with one another to influence the onset, continuation, and desistance of crime (Farrington, 2002).

There are at least five prevailing developmental life course theories: integrated cognitive antisocial potential theory (Farrington, 2002); social development model (Hawkins, 1996); two qualitatively distinct categories of antisocial people (life course persistent and adolescence-limited offenders; Moffitt, 1993); integrative control theory (LeBlanc, 1997); and interactional theory (Thornberry & Krohns, 2001). Although each theory varies in relationship to personal, environmental, and social constructs, the 10 most widely accepted conclusions that each theory needs to be able to explain include the following (Farrington):

1. The prevalence of offending peaks in the late teenage years (between ages 15 and 19).
2. The peak age of onset of offending is between 8 and 14, and the peak age of desistance is between 20 and 29.
3. An early age of onset predicts relatively long criminal career duration and the commitment of multiple offenses.
4. A marked continuity is seen in offending and antisocial behavior from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.
5. A small fraction of the population commits a large fraction of all crimes.
6. Offending is versatile rather than specialized.
7. The types of acts defined as offenses are elements of a larger syndrome of antisocial behaviors (e.g., heavy drinking, reckless driving, sexual promiscuity, bullying, and/or truancy).
8. Most offenses up to the late teenage years are committed with others, whereas most offenses from age 20 onward are committed alone.
9. The reasons given for offending up to the late teenage years are quite variable (e.g., excitement, enjoyment, or anger).
10. Different types of first-time offenses tend to be committed at distinctively different ages.

## CONCLUSION

An understanding of the sociological theories of crime and delinquency can be viewed as resting on three pillars: the theory of anomie, the Chicago School, and conflict theory as illustrated in Figure 1. The theory of anomie refers to the breakdown of norms and moral order in a society caused by the increasing division of labor and individualism that contributed to criminal



**FIGURE 1** Conceptual map of sociological theories of crime and delinquency.

behaviors. By reviewing crime and delinquency within the context of the physical characteristics, cultural norms, and practices of neighborhoods (the Chicago School), residents engage in crime as a result of the lack of legitimate opportunities for success and socialization into criminal cultures. Conflict theory suggests that crime is not the result of a breakdown in society but rather a constant and perpetual struggle between those who have power and authority and those who do not. Conflict theory is used to explain crime by emphasizing the importance of conflict in maintaining social order and assisting with the groups in power in maintaining control over criminal behavior.

From these beginnings, control theories grew out of theories of anomie to explain why people chose not to conform during periods of alienation and engage in criminal acts by not obeying the rules of conventional society. Based on theories of anomie, theories of social structure and strain placed the breakdown of societal norms within the context of a lack of legitimate opportunities in one's community, where crime emerges due to the lack of access to the legitimate means to acquiring the values and goals set by mainstream society. These theories led to theories about delinquent subcultures and how they transmit criminal values through generations to sustain their cultures and to opportunity theory, whereby people in impoverished neighborhoods gained status and respect through acquiring and

utilizing the illegitimate means most available to them. Finally, developmental life course theories seek to incorporate the social environment elements of risk factors, neighborhood effects, and the ratio of legitimate and illegitimate opportunities with the human behavior factors related to life events.

In reflection on the array of sociological theories of crime and delinquency, it is important to keep in mind that theories are shaped by the life experiences and the assumptions and worldviews of the theorists. Because life experiences change as society changes, theoretical views about crime also change. As the times and the social context change, previous theories lose their appeal, and other theories start to appear more relevant. Furthermore, everyone's understanding about crime is conditioned by personal social experiences. Given that theories are shaped by the world in which theorists live, our own interpretation of these theories when applied, explained, and combined together can help to explain contemporary criminal and delinquent activities and behaviors.

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