Crime, deviance and social control

The difference between crime and deviance, agencies of control, types of crime and how crime is measured, patterns and explanations of crime by age, ethnicity, gender and class, the main sociological theories, and the aims and effectiveness of punishment and policing.

Crime and **deviance** are among the most debated topics in sociology. This chapter covers the definitions, how crime is measured, who commits it and why, the main theories, and how societies deal with it.

6.1 What are crime, deviance and social control?

Crime and deviance

- **Crime**: an act that **breaks the law** and can be punished by the state.
- **Deviance**: behaviour that **breaks a social norm**, whether or not it is illegal.

Some acts are both (theft). Some crimes are not deviant (speeding is illegal, but very common). Some deviance is not criminal (rude behaviour, unusual dress).

> **Crime and deviance are relative: they vary between societies and cultures (drinking alcohol is legal in some countries and illegal in others), between situations (killing in war or self-defence), and over time (homosexuality has been decriminalised in many countries, and is still a crime in others).**

Social control

- **Formal agencies**: the **police**, **courts**, **armed forces**, **government** and the **penal system**. They make and enforce laws and punish offenders.
- **Informal agencies**: **family**, **education**, **workplace**, **peer group**, **traditional and digital media** and **religion**. They shape behaviour through approval and disapproval.

How they work: formal control prevents crime by **deterrence**, **surveillance** and **punishment**; informal control prevents it by **socialisation** and the fear of losing respect.

Effectiveness: control works best when agencies **cooperate** and people see the rules as **fair**. Formal control does not reach everything; informal control can fail when families or communities are weak, or when a sub-culture promotes deviance.

Note Academy

Types of crime

Type	Meaning
Violent crime	harm to people: assault, murder
Property crime	theft, burglary, vandalism
White-collar / corporate crime	committed by professionals or companies at work: fraud, tax evasion, insider trading, unsafe products
Expressive crime	driven by **emotion**: anger, hatred (a violent fight)
Instrumental crime	committed to **gain something** (money, goods): burglary
Gang crime	committed by organised groups
Green crime	harm to the environment: illegal dumping, poaching
Global / organised crime	across borders: drug and people trafficking, money laundering
Cyber crime	using computers: hacking, identity theft, online fraud
Hate crime	targeted at a person's identity: race, religion, gender, disability
Domestic crime	abuse or violence within the home

Measuring crime

Measure	What it is	Strength	Limitation
Official statistics	crimes **recorded by the police**	cheap, large-scale, over time	misses unreported and unrecorded crime; the police may not record all reported crimes; definitions change
Self-report studies	people say what crimes **they have committed**	reveals hidden crime, including that of offenders not caught	people may lie or forget; small samples
Victim surveys (local and national)	people say what crimes **were committed against them**	include **unreported** crime, show victims' experience	memory, may not mention embarrassing crimes; excludes crimes with no direct victim (e.g. drug use, fraud)

The "**dark figure of crime**" is crime that is **unreported** (people do not report it) or **unrecorded** (the police do not record it). Because of it, official statistics **understate** crime.

Note Academy

6.2 What are the patterns of and explanations for crime and deviance?

Patterns of crime and victimisation

Factor	Official statistics suggest
Age	most offenders are **young** (teenagers and young adults); the young are also frequent victims
Social class	**working-class** people are over-represented in crime statistics (but white-collar crime is under-recorded)
Gender	**men** commit most recorded crime, especially violent crime; women are more often victims of domestic and sexual violence
Ethnicity	some minority groups are over-represented in arrests and prisons, and are more often victims of hate crime

Explanations by age

- **Police targeting / stop and search**: young people are targeted, so more are arrested.
- **Self-fulfilling prophecy** and **stereotyping**: young people labelled as troublemakers may live up to the label.
- **Gang culture**: gangs provide status and belonging.
- **Socialisation and social control**: weak control by family and school.
- **Lack of opportunity**: unemployment and few legitimate routes to success.
- **Status frustration** (Cohen): lower-class boys fail in the middle-class school system and gain status by deviance instead.

Explanations by ethnicity

- **Institutional racism** and **prejudice and discrimination** in policing and the courts.
- **Police targeting and stop and search** of minority groups, so more are stopped and arrested.
- **Material and relative deprivation**: poverty and a feeling of being worse off than others.
- **Stereotyping**, **gang culture** and **status frustration**.

Note Academy

Explanations by gender

- **Chivalry thesis**: police and courts are **more lenient** towards women, so female crime is under-recorded (some evidence challenges this).
- **Culture of masculinity**: boys are socialised to be tough and take risks.
- **Socialisation and social control**: girls are more closely supervised.
- **Misogyny**: hatred of women explains some violent crime against them.
- **Stereotyping**, **gang culture**, **lack of opportunity**.

Explanations by social class

- **Social exclusion**: being shut out from jobs, education, housing.
- **Material and relative deprivation**.
- **Inadequate socialisation**.
- **Lack of opportunity** and **status frustration**.
- **Power inequalities**: the powerful can **make laws** that protect their interests and avoid arrest.
- **Police targeting** of working-class areas.

Note Academy

Sociological theories of crime and deviance

Theory	Explanation
Functionalism	crime is **normal** and can be **useful** (Durkheim: it reinforces shared values and can bring change). **Strain theory** (Merton): when people cannot achieve society's goals (wealth) by legitimate means, they may turn to crime or other responses (innovation, ritualism, retreatism, rebellion). **Subcultural theory** (Cohen; Cloward and Ohlin): groups form deviant subcultures to gain status. The **New Right** blames weak families, welfare dependency and lack of discipline.
Interactionism	deviance is a **label** applied by others (**labelling**; Becker): the label can lead to a **self-fulfilling prophecy** and a deviant career. **Moral panic** (Stanley Cohen: **folk devils**): the media exaggerate a group's behaviour, causing public alarm and tougher control.
Marxism	the law and the justice system protect the **ruling class**; **capitalism** itself is **criminogenic** (it encourages greed and crime); **white-collar crime** is under-prosecuted.
Feminism	the law and the justice system reflect **patriarchy**; crimes against women (domestic violence, rape) have been under-reported or under-prosecuted; **women's** crime is explained by their position in society.
Postmodernism	crime and deviance are **socially constructed**; **definitions change**, there are many competing views and the **media** and **social media** shape what is seen as deviant.

Evaluating the explanations

- **Age**: labelling and stereotyping explain over-policing, but some young people do commit crime.
- **Ethnicity**: discrimination explains part of the difference, but poverty is also a factor.
- **Gender**: socialisation is convincing, but the chivalry thesis is debated.
- **Class**: strain and deprivation explain much, but **most poor people do not commit crime**, and middle-class crime exists.
- **Theories**: functionalism explains why crime exists but ignores power; Marxism exposes power but ignores non-class crime; interactionism explains labelling but not why the first deviance occurs.

Note Academy

6.3 How is crime dealt with in different societies?

Aims of punishment

Aim	Meaning
Protection of citizens	keep the public safe
Deterrence	put people off committing crime (**individual** deterrence of the offender, **general** deterrence of others)
Retribution	"an eye for an eye": the offender **deserves** punishment; society takes revenge
Incapacitation	stop the offender committing crime (prison, execution)
Rehabilitation	change the offender so they do not offend again (education, treatment)

Note Academy

Types of punishment

Punishment	Notes on effectiveness
Prison	protects the public, deters; but high **reoffending rates**, expensive, a "school for crime"
Community sentencing	unpaid work etc.; cheaper, helps rehabilitation; seen by some as "soft"
Financial penalties (fines)	cheap, but may not affect the wealthy and may hit the poor harder
Rehabilitation programmes	reduce reoffending if well run; need funding
Capital punishment	permanent incapacitation; but evidence for deterrence is weak and mistakes cannot be undone
Corporal punishment	physical punishment; opposed on human rights grounds
Exile	removing a person from society
Ostracism	informal shunning
Non-custodial sentences	**electronic tagging, curfews, restraining orders**
Probation	supervision in the community
Police cautions	formal warnings for minor offences
Social media and vigilante groups	informal "punishment" by public shaming or by groups taking the law into their own hands; unregulated and risks injustice

Note Academy

Policing and law enforcement

- **Policing strategies**: targeting hot spots, **stop and search**, patrols. These can reduce crime but may cause **resentment and labelling** of groups.
- **Surveillance**: CCTV, **digital surveillance**, facial recognition. Can deter and solve crime but raise **privacy** concerns.
- **Crime prevention**: neighbourhood watch, better street lighting, education and youth programmes.
- **Community policing** (officers who know and work with the local community) and **military-style policing** (heavy force, used in conflict or riots) differ in how much they depend on public trust.

TRY IT

To what extent is prison the best way to deal with crime? For: it protects the public through **incapacitation**, may deter others and satisfies the wish for **retribution**. Against: high **reoffending**

rates, it is costly and can make offenders more criminal; **rehabilitation** and community sentences may be more effective for minor crimes. **Conclusion**: prison is necessary for serious and violent crime, but for most offenders a mix of rehabilitation and community sentences works better.

Note Academy