

the development of practical policies to reduce crime. There are two versions of realist theory: Left Realism and Right Realism, which are linked to different political perspectives. Left Realism tends to take an approach of 'tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime', generally linked to Labour Party policies, while Right Realism puts greater emphasis on being tougher on the criminals than on the causes, and is associated more with Conservative Party and New Right policies. The following sections focus on the main features of Left and Right Realist theories, with the practical policy solutions arising from them discussed in Topic 4 (see pages 532-7).

Left Realism

Left Realism developed in the 1980s and is particularly identified with Lea and Young (1984). It developed as a response to traditional Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, which it accused of:

- Not taking working-class crime seriously, and romanticizing working-class criminals as 'Robin Hood' characters fighting against social inequality and injustice, or reducing working-class crime to simple moral panics induced by the capitalist state, or regarding it as socially constructed through selective law enforcement and the labelling process
- Failing to take victimization seriously, and the fact that most victims were the poor and deprived
- Having no practical policies to reduce crime.

Through victim surveys (see pages 476-7) like the Islington crime surveys, Left Realists found crime was a serious problem, particularly in more deprived inner-city areas, and needed policies to tackle it. The sort of crime that worries people most is primarily street crime like mugging, violence, car crime and burglary, which is mainly carried out by young working-class males. Those at the greatest risk of becoming victims of these offences, and who have the highest fears about crime, are not the rich but the poor - the deprived white and minority ethnic residents living in inner-city areas. Left Realists accept that most people don't care much about white-collar and corporate crime, as they do not regard it as having any impact on their lives.

Explaining crime

Like Marxists, Left Realists accept that structural inequalities, social conditions and perceptions of injustice are the major causes of crime. Lea and Young attempt to explain why people turn to crime using three key concepts.

- *Relative deprivation.* It is not deprivation as such which causes people to commit crime, as most deprived people do not turn to crime, but whether they see themselves as deprived relative to others they compare themselves with. This can generate discontent and resentment as their expectations are not met.
- *Marginalization.* Some groups experience **marginality**, as they find themselves politically and economically 'on the edge' of mainstream society, and face social exclusion through factors like poor educational achievement, unemployment and lack of involvement in community organizations. Such marginality, combined with relative deprivation, can lead to anti-social behaviour, crime, violence and rioting as there are few other means of expressing their frustrations and resentments at their exclusion.
- *Subculture.* Working-class deviant subcultures emerge as group solutions to the problems of relative deprivation and marginality arising from social inequality, though they take different forms over time and in different contexts, such as street gangs or various youth subcultures. These can act as motivators for crime, as some working-class subcultures see offending as acceptable behaviour.

Late modernity and the bulimic society

Young (1999, 2003) has more recently developed Left Realism and linked the explanations for crime to changes in society emerging in late modernity. Young argues that late modern societies are media saturated, and everyone, even the poorest, is included in consumer culture through constant exposure to advertising of consumer goods and media-generated lifestyles, which raise everyone's expectations of what the good life is like. However, this cultural inclusion is accompanied for those at the

Marginality is where some people are pushed to the margins or edges of society by poverty, lack of education, disability, racism and so on, and face social exclusion.

bottom of the class structure by social and economic exclusion, which means they cannot afford to actively participate in consumer society, as they can't afford to buy the goods necessary to forge new identities and lifestyles. Young argued this process whereby cultural inclusion was combined with social and economic exclusion was creating a 'bulimic society', in which people gorge themselves on media images of expensive consumer lifestyles, but are then forced by economic circumstances to vomit out their raised expectations. This intensifies the sense of frustration, resentment and anger among young people at their relative deprivation. Lewis et al. (2011) found the desire to consume by looting what was otherwise denied them in a bulimic society was a significant factor motivating some of the 13,000 to 15,000 people involved in riots and looting in English cities in August 2011.

Young argues the intensified sense of relative deprivation is made worse by three further features of late modernity.

- 1 *Growing individualism.* There is a growing emphasis on self-seeking, individual freedom and self-centredness, and less community spirit and concern for the welfare of others.
- 2 *The weakening of informal controls.* Traditional social structures like the family and close-knit communities have been breaking up, and are no longer able to provide support and informal controls on the behaviour of those living in the community.
- 3 *Growing economic inequality and economic change.* Globalization has meant the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest has grown massively, with staggering rewards for those at the top gained through participation in a global economy – such as footballers and music stars who are global media stars – while at the same time there has been a decline in traditional manufacturing industries, loss of unskilled work and more unemployment or part-time or short-term temporary work, which affected young working-class males the most.

The toxic mix that generates crime

The factors of late modernity considered above combine in a toxic mix that generates crime among young people in the most deprived communities. In such communities, the life of young people is marked by greater risk, more uncertainty and less informal control over their behaviour than ever before. With no other outlets for their anger and frustration at being excluded from the lifestyles they aspire to, they are more likely to involve themselves in various forms of what Lyng (1990, 2005) called 'edgework'. This involves all manner of thrill-seeking and risk-taking behaviour, not necessarily criminal or deviant, but the pursuit of peril may include exploring the boundaries between legal and criminal behaviour. This can lead to crime and violence, anti-social behaviour, rioting and self-destructive confrontations with the law.

Understanding and tackling crime: the square of crime

To understand and tackle crime, Lea and Young suggest it is necessary to examine the inter-relationships between four elements of what has been called 'the square of crime' – illustrated in figure 6.3 – and how they influence or interact with one another in influencing crime levels in any community.

- *Social structural factors and formal social control by the state.* These influence the context of crime, such as how crime is defined and its social causes, how law enforcement is carried out and decisions whether an act is labelled as criminal or not, styles of policing and the ability of the police to influence crime levels by deterring and catching offenders.
- *The public and the extent of informal social control.* How do people react to crime in their communities? Are offenders condemned by family, peer groups and neighbours? Do the public report offences? Do they trust the police? Do they buy stolen goods? Is the offence just seen as part of normal life in their community?
- *The role of victims.* Why do people become victims and what do they do about it? Victims are often of the same ethnic group, class and community as the offenders, or partners in a relationship with them. How do victims view offenders? Will they report them? Could or would the police do anything?
- *The offenders.* What meaning does the act have to the offender? Why do they choose to offend? Is it because they feel marginalized? Because they belong to a deviant subculture? Because they

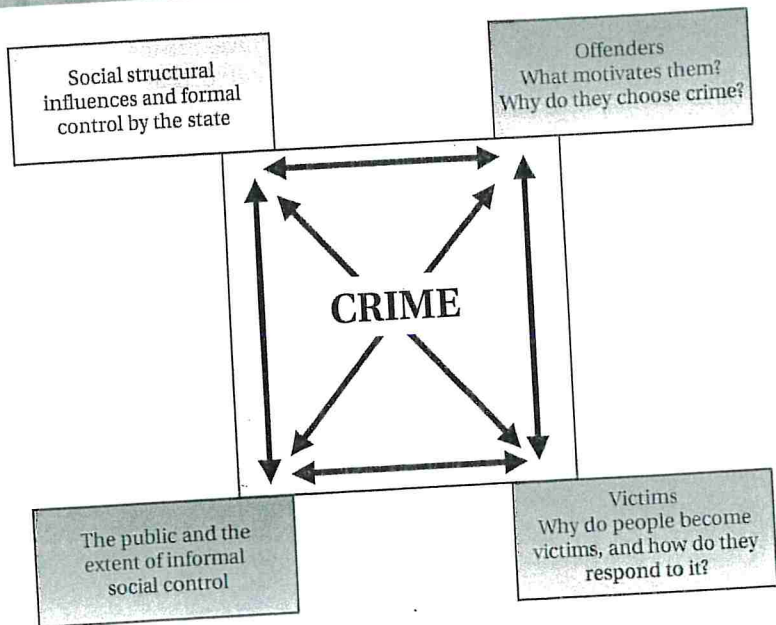


Figure 6.3 The square of crime .

feel relatively deprived? Offenders choose to commit crimes – to what extent are they driven to it by outside forces, and how is this choice influenced by the other three factors?

Activity

Look at the four elements in figure 6.3 making up the square of crime, and suggest and explain how:

- 1 a) The attitudes of the public might affect whether or not an act is defined as a crime;
- b) The attitudes of the public towards the police might affect the police's ability to reduce crime levels in a community;
- c) The attitudes of a community towards offenders might influence whether or not they commit offences in the future;
- d) The attitudes of victims and their relationship with offenders might affect crime reporting in a community;
- e) The attitudes of the police towards offending and their clear-up rates might influence crime levels in a community.
- 2 On the basis of this activity and your understanding of Left Realism, suggest four practical policies that Left Realists might adopt for reducing crime in a deprived community.

Evaluation of Left Realism

Strengths

Left Realism draws on a range of theories, such as Marxist ideas of the importance of social inequality, Merton's concept of strain and anomie, Cohen's ideas of status frustration, subcultural theories, labelling, and the growth of individualism and consumerism in late modernity to produce a fuller explanation for crime than that offered by any one single theory. It does not glamorize crime as Marxist writers do, and takes the importance of tackling crime and the fear of crime seriously – it recognizes that crime can have devastating consequences for the most deprived communities, and that most offenders *and* victims are poor and working-class. It also sees the importance of community solutions to crime – these are discussed in Topic 4 (see pages 532–4).

Limitations

- 1 It neglects other responses to relative deprivation and marginality apart from crime, such as Merton's *retreatism* and *ritualism*, though it does recognize Merton's *rebellion*.

- 2 It neglects gender as a significant issue, and particularly those crimes of which females are the more likely victims, such as domestic violence and rape. Left Realism tends to be part of that 'malestream criminology' which feminists are critical of.
- 3 It doesn't pay much attention to white-collar and corporate crime, even though crimes such as fraud, neglect of health and safety and pollution controls, and sale of unsafe products often have the greatest impact on the most deprived communities.
- 4 It doesn't really explain why most deprived working-class youth *don't* turn to crime. If the 'toxic mix' is as toxic as it appears to be, why isn't there more crime, and why have crime rates been generally falling rather than increasing in recent years, despite a growing emphasis on consumerism combined with prolonged economic recession, unemployment and austerity?

Right Realism and rational choice and opportunity theories

Right Realism is associated with the New Right, and is now, arguably, the greatest influence on current Home Office policy of all theories of crime, because of the practical policies for crime prevention which derive from it (see Topic 4 pages 534–7).

Right Realism has the following key features:

- 1 *Value consensus and shared morality underpin society.* This is reflected in the law, and criminals are immoral because they breach this consensus. Social order is crucial, and individuals should be able to live their lives without fear of crime.
- 2 *People are naturally selfish.* Like control theory, it suggests people are essentially self-seeking, and need to have their natural tendency to take shortcuts by committing crime regulated by the agencies of socialization and social control, including the law. This links to the next point on community control.
- 3 *Community control.* It is poor socialization and lack of community controls that lie behind crime and anti-social behaviour. The most effective form of crime control is through strengthening the bonds of community – the types of bond suggested by Hirschi's control theory. Stricter socialization through the family and education and community pressure, and re-establishing social cohesion and a sense of individual responsibility, are all likely to be more effective in preventing crime than police action. These views are reflected in the work of New Right theorists like Murray (1989, 1990), who link crime to an unemployed workshy underclass, who live in broken communities with high rates of social disorder and crime. Murray suggests this underclass is characterized by welfare dependency, lack of individual responsibility and respect for authority, dysfunctional family life, high rates of family breakdown and lone parenthood, which mean parents fail to properly socialize and control their children, and to teach them proper moral standards, and there is a lack of community pressure to control deviance.
- 4 *Rational choice and opportunity.* People are rational, and weigh up the costs and benefits before choosing what action to take. Cornish and Clarke (1986) applied this rational choice and opportunity theory to crime, and suggested that people choose to commit crime because they decide that the benefits to be gained are greater than the potential costs, the opportunities are available, and the risks are therefore worth it. The solution is, then, to increase the costs, such as heavier policing to increase the risks of being caught, and to reduce the opportunities for crime (this is discussed further on pages 534–7).
- 5 *Crime will always exist.* There will always be some people whose natural selfishness and greed will slip through other controls. It's a waste of time trying to find out what the social causes of crime are as the Left Realists and Marxists seek to do, because, for example, most deprived people don't commit crime. The most that can be achieved is to reduce the impact of crime on victims, particularly crimes like violence and burglary, which are of major concern to the public. White-collar and corporate crimes have relatively little impact on individuals in their daily lives, so they shouldn't be a major focus for policing.

Rational choice theory suggests people weigh up the costs and benefits before choosing whether to commit a crime.



Evaluation of Right Realism

Strengths

- 1 It addresses the immediate causes of crime, and provides policies for reducing the opportunities for crime (see Topic 4).
- 2 It recognizes, like Left Realism, the importance of community control and community responses to crime in affecting crime levels.

Limitations

- 1 It doesn't address the wider structural causes of crime that other theories do.
- 2 It doesn't pay any attention to white-collar and corporate crime, and other 'hidden crimes' like domestic violence and child abuse.
- 3 It suggests that offenders act rationally, weighing up costs and benefits, but some crimes are impulsive or irrational, and do not bring any obvious gain, like vandalism or violence; Lyng's (1990, 2005) conception of 'edgework' or Katz's (1988) work on the seductions of crime (see pages 470–1), which suggest people might offend for the seductiveness, attractiveness and fun derived from the risk-taking, thrill and buzz involved in committing crime, are not explained by rational choice theory.

Postmodernist theories of crime

Postmodernists argue that society is changing so rapidly and constantly that it is marked by uncertainty and risk, and society is diverse and fragmented, with a huge variety of groups with different interests and lifestyles. Postmodernists view the category 'crime' as simply a social construction, based on a narrow legal definition, reflecting an outdated metanarrative of the law which does not reflect the diversity of postmodern society. In postmodern society, people are increasingly freed from the constraints arising from social norms and social bonds to others, yet crime as presently defined is simply an expression of a particular view among those with power of how people should conduct themselves, and denies people's freedom, self-identity and difference. It is necessary to develop a transgressive approach, which goes beyond the usual boundaries of defining crime as