

Why Crime?

Why Crime?

*An Interdisciplinary Approach to
Explaining Criminal Behavior*

THIRD EDITION

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I dedicate this book to my wonderful friends and colleagues who make living and working in Boone so worthwhile.

—MATTHEW B. ROBINSON

I dedicate this book to my stunningly beautiful wife, Shonna, and to my four children: Brooke, Jackson, Belle, and Blake.

—KEVIN M. BEAVER

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Preface

Why Crime? An Interdisciplinary Approach to Explaining Criminal Behavior is about why crime happens. The book introduces criminological theory with a focus on the *risk factors* that increase the likelihood that people will engage in antisocial and violent behaviors. Instead of rehashing the same material in the same way as nearly every other text on the market, we discuss individual criminological theories only to the degree that they are supported by scientific evidence. From the evidence presented, we ultimately put forth a new theory of antisocial behavior and criminality. *Why Crime?* advances the state of knowledge in criminological theory by integrating current theories into a new, integrated, interdisciplinary theory of antisocial behavior and criminality.

Why Crime? is different from any other criminological theory text on the market in several ways. In this book, we focus on the factors that either produce or reduce criminality, delinquency, and other maladaptive, aggressive, violent, and antisocial behaviors; these have been identified by various theorists across numerous academic disciplines. Most criminological theory texts instead organize materials in the same general fashion, normally summarizing individual theories of crime by academic discipline. We argue that this approach is not acceptable for the mere fact that there are no real dividing lines in knowledge. Criminal behaviors cannot be adequately explained by any one theory in existence, nor by any one academic discipline for that matter. Thus, in this book we deemphasize the academic disciplines from which theories arose by intentionally *not* discussing any one theory or academic discipline in any greater depth than another.

Most texts give biological factors brief or no coverage, as if these factors are unimportant. We contend that this is not because of the state of scientific evidence with regard to the actual sources of human behavior but instead due to

what we term *disciplinary myopia*, or not being able to see outside one's own academic discipline. Most criminologists are heavily trained in disciplines such as sociology, with little to no education about genetics, neurology, and other biological sciences. This is unfortunate because results from studies of biological factors such as genetics, epigenetics, and brain function clearly show that risk factors within our genes and brains have huge impacts on how we behave. *Why Crime?* offers an integrated theory, one that combines sociological, psychological, biological, and other factors into a single, unified theory.

The notable differences about *Why Crime?* are numerous. First, we use a perspective (or way of looking at the world) known as the *integrated systems perspective* to organize the material; factors that increase or decrease the risk of antisocial behavior are placed into one of six levels of analysis, from cell to society. This is a perspective the primary author learned about in graduate school under the tutelage of Professors C. Ray Jeffery and Frederic L. Faust. Second, our goal is not really to explain only crime or criminality but rather to develop a theory for why people commit antisocial behaviors in general, which include criminality, delinquency, and other maladaptive, aggressive, and violent behaviors. This theory advances our understanding of such behaviors beyond current knowledge. Third, we draw out the important criminogenic and crime preventive factors from theories of crime and leave the theories and theorists themselves behind. This serves to place emphasis on where it belongs—the knowledge rather than the people who have created it. Fourth, we state relationships between these factors and antisocial behavior in a testable format. We provide nominal and operational definitions of key concepts for the purposes of theory testing. Fifth, after summarizing the main findings of tests of traditional theories of crime, we offer a new theory of antisocial behavior and criminality in the final chapter, one based on the integrated systems perspective that is integrated and developmental in nature. *Why Crime?* meaningfully integrates theoretical contributions from not only sociology—the field that currently dominates criminological thinking and theorizing—but also biology, psychology, human development, and other fields that are ignored relative to sociology.

The organization of *Why Crime?* is perhaps the most unique feature. The book is not organized around the traditional categories of crime theories. For example, we do not organize the material based on the academic disciplines that created the theories—thus, biological theories are not separated from psychological theories merely because they originated from separate disciplines. We argue vehemently in the book that this serves to reinforce artificial boundaries in knowledge about crime and to create the disciplinary myopia which

limits our understanding of crime. Additionally, we do not spend a lot of time assessing the merits of one particular theory of crime versus another theory of crime, which tends to create divisions within the general disciplines of criminology and criminal justice.

Throughout the book, we illustrate that so-called competing theories of crime actually end up making similar predictions about crime and that many produce the same criminal justice and crime prevention policy implications. Thus, we discuss significant overlap between distinct theories of crime. We accomplish this by organizing the tremendous material about theories of crime into chapters based on which level of analysis they fit into in the integrated systems perspective. This perspective suggests that antisocial and criminal behavior result when factors at six levels of analysis interact in the environment. While some factors may end up having greater influence on behavior than others, we do not simply create a multifactor theory that places disproportionate emphasis on any one academic discipline. Rather, we suggest that all academic disciplines can make meaningful contributions to our understanding of the etiology of antisocial and criminal behavior and that the tools and methodologies of each discipline are needed to fully account for it.

Chapter by Chapter

The book is comprised of 10 chapters. The first chapter discusses the nature of criminality, delinquency, and antisocial behaviors. The second chapter introduces the reader to purposes of theory and lays out important terms for the rest of the book. The third chapter discusses different theoretical perspectives in criminological theory and introduces the integrated systems perspective. Each subsequent chapter is organized around one level of analysis, starting with the cell level (chapter 4), moving to the organ level (chapter 5), then to the organism level (chapter 6), group level (chapter 7), community and organization level (chapter 8), and society level (chapter 9). Key concepts from theories of crime are placed into their respective level of analysis—for example, genetic studies into cellular-level explanations, brain dysfunction studies into organ-level explanations, personality theories into organism-level explanations, learning theories into group-level explanations, and so on. We attempt to cull the important crime-related factors from criminological theories so that we can conclude with an integrated, interdisciplinary theory of antisocial behavior which combines the various criminogenic factors into an explanatory model (chapter 10).

We conclude the book with this integrated theory, a call for testing of the theory, and presenting results from an original test of the theory. We also seek to develop more rational and theory-informed policy implications for American criminal justice. *Why Crime?* is the only book on the market that takes such an approach.

This third edition presents a newly modified version of our theory—the Integrated Systems Theory of antisocial behavior that’s been so well-received by criminologists. The theory is more parsimonious in order to make it easier to test. This version of the theory grew out of Danish National Television’s portrayal of the theory in their film, *Biology and Crime!*