

*Discuss why crime is a real problem
that must be taken seriously by criminologists*

Outline

1. Introduction: the problem of crime
2. Description: the notion of crime
3. General analysis: society vs. crime
4. Current information: society's perception of crime
5. Discussion: why we perceive crime in such manner
6. Conclusions: crime, as serious as it is
7. Bibliography

Introduction: the problem of crime

Among the issues that the humankind has faced throughout its history, one of the most ancient and most perpetuating is that of crime. History is brimming with the examples of wrongdoings, big and small. Crime has remained an innate trait of the human existence, a clear sign of man's (or world's) imperfection. Numerous investigations and ample research carried out in the sphere of crime and deviant behavior throughout the time, and in the last decades especially, serve a firm proof of the fact that the phenomenon persists and that it still constitutes a threatening problem for humans within many contexts. Even leaving all available theoretic assumptions and investigated considerations concerning crime unemployed and basing one's claim solely upon personal empirical experience, probably every human being can state that today crime is a problem – a social, personal, moral, and spiritual problem. The present paper deals with the problem of crime, and its basic attempt is to investigate the ramifications of the notion of 'crime' as well as to trace the attitude of human society towards the phenomenon that dwells within its very environment. Based on all proof furnished, the work will assume the ever growing necessity to take the issue of crime seriously, especially by the criminologists, as crime progresses and evolves abreast of the society.

Description: the notion of crime

It is a common fact that before the law came, no crime was present, since there was no law to define crime. Dwelling upon the social reality of crime, Quinney (1970) as cited in Feldman (1978), states that "crime is a definition of human conduct that is created by authorized agents in a politically organized society" (p. 247). Explaining the notion, Quinney claims that "crime is not inherent in behavior" (cited in Feldman, 1978), rather, "it is a judgment made by some about the actions and characteristics of others". The major assumption in this vein is that the increase in the number of definitions of crime leads to the

growth of crime itself. Therefore, the way a certain action is defined within the society influences the criminal status of that action. A crime must involve malicious intent, the *mens rea*, in legal terms (Finsterbusch and McKenna, 1996, p. 283). Yet many actions lead to negative effects, thus becoming wrongdoings, without any direct malicious intent.

DiIulo (1989, cited in Finsterbusch and McKenna, 1996, pp. 284-288) suggests that the *mens rea* clearly present in street crime makes it much more harmful than the so-called “white-collar crime”. This view, however is opposed by Reiman (1990, cited in Finsterbusch and McKenna, 1996, pp. 290-298) who sees the white-collar crime as a much more harmful, though often concealed, threat to the society, also claiming that the picture reflected in the justice system is distorted, as it emphasizes street crime more than the more “sophisticated” and indirect white-collar crime (p.292) . The truth must lie somewhere in between the two views, and criminology should take equal heed of the two types of crime.

General analysis: society vs. crime

Criminology as a social science deals with reasons, circumstances, effects, powers, and the public attitude with regards to crime. The attitude towards crime in the society can be a vivid indicator of a few things, such as the economic state of the society, its culture, etc. The general assumption is that crime as such is panned by all present societies, and though attitude towards certain wrongdoing may differ from nation to nation, the rudimental lines of behavior harmful for society, and, thus, criminal, are all-pervasive. Because crime is devastating in nature, society fears it. The *Public Opinion and Crime - Fear of Crime* online article (Anon., n.d.) suggests the following:

“Although it is difficult to quantify and easy to exaggerate, some social observers see in widespread fear of crime a general decline in quality of life in the United States, one that manifests itself in restrictions on individual freedom, a loss of community, deserted and

decayed inner cities, and numerous intangible casualties to fear (ranging from loss of trust among strangers to restricted outdoor play for children).” (Anon., n.d.)

Current information: society’s perception of crime

Several large-scale surveys have been conducted in recent decades to precisely measure public opinion about the seriousness of crimes, and the results are both predictable and surprising (Wolfgang et al.,1985; Warr, 1994, cited in *Public Opinion and Crime - The Seriousness of Crimes*, Anon., n. d.).

“In general, crimes against persons are perceived to be the most serious offenses, although some nonviolent acts (e.g., selling heroin) fall within the same seriousness range as violent crimes. The perceived seriousness of an offense can vary greatly depending on who the victim and offender are. Violence between strangers, for example, is perceived to be more serious than violence between intimates, even when the events are otherwise comparable. The physical vulnerability of the victim also affects seriousness judgments; striking an elderly woman is not the same as striking a young man. In general, there is a good deal of agreement about the seriousness of crimes within our society, although some behaviors (e.g., certain forms of drug use) remain contentious issues”. (information taken from *Public Opinion and Crime - The Seriousness of Crimes*, Anon., n. d.).

Discussion: why we perceive crime in such manner

Judging from the information above, one can state that people tend to evaluate criminal actions as different in terms of “wrongfulness” and “morality”, even if the degree of harm or methods used are the same. Warr (1989, cited in *Public Opinion and Crime - The Seriousness Of Crimes*, Anon., n. d.) states that individuals distinguish two elements of the seriousness of crime: the harmfulness of an act and its wrongfulness (“moral gravity”). Thus, some actions can be more harmful than wrong, and others, vice versa, are perceived to be not as wrong as they are harmful. Often seriousness attached to a certain crime committed by a

person is not based on the objective degree of its harm, but on the fact of it being a violation of certain social taboos (*Public Opinion and Crime - the Seriousness of Crimes*, Anon., n. d.).

Conclusions: crime, as serious as it is

Having analyzed the notion of crime, having dealt with its types and having traced the attitude of the society towards the problem of crime, one can state that the issue is permanently current for the society. As certain persons, endowed with proper authority, define certain actions as illegal, the scope of criminal behavior may vary. So may vary the degree of seriousness attached to a wrongdoing by people who tend to base their judgments on social morals rather than factual features of the crime. Criminologists as experts in the field of crime are to take multiple factors into account when assessing major crime indexes and features, among which is crime seriousness. The society must also take a firm stand not only against the street crime, but also against the white-collar crime, which, though often underestimated, concealed, and taken outside the main focus of criminology, can be no less detrimental than the street crime, or even more devastating.

Bibliography

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