

Lessons in Criminology and Criminal Justice

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By

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**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0723-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0723-4

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PREFACE

Synopsis

“Lessons in Criminology and Criminal Justice” tells the story of 25 facts about crime and criminal justice that I know to be absolutely true based on a quarter century of working in the field. The book will lay out each fact, one at a time, and then present the research in support of that fact. Though the book is scholarly in nature, it is written for the layperson and introductory student. Using humor where appropriate, but also utilizing a “tell it like it is” approach, the book will captivate the reader and keep their attention throughout. The format of the book is unique, as no one has ever written such a book within the fields of Criminology and Criminal Justice. The book will be always interesting, occasionally funny, timely, and engaging.

Contents

Here are the 25 facts to be discussed in the book—each in its own chapter—with a brief summary of the argument to be made regarding each:

1. Crime is invented so we can have as much or as little crime as we want.

Crime comes from the criminal law, which is written by human beings. As a result, crime is invented by people. This means anything can be a crime, and nothing—no matter how immoral or harmful it is—is automatically a crime. One outcome of this reality is that there are many crimes that are silly and unnecessary. We can thus prevent crime by making less things illegal. The book will focus on this issue and suggest some crimes that ought to be legalized, since criminalizing them has done more harm than good.

2. Relative to the size of the population, there is very little serious crime in the United States.

In a country with more than 320 million people, less than 20,000 are murdered each year, meaning 99.994% of Americans are not killed by crime. Further, only about 5 million are victims of violent crime, with less than 1 million actually being injured by serious street crime. Though you wouldn't know it by watching the news, even serious street crimes are very uncommon in the United States. Using criminological theory, the book explains why this is so.

3. Criminal victimization is heavily concentrated in certain segments of the population.

Close your eyes and picture a crime victim. Unless you saw a young, African American male, you did not see an accurate picture of who tends to be most victimized by street crime in the United States. Criminologists have clearly explained why this is so. The book delves into this topic and illustrates reasons why some groups in the country are more likely to be victimized by crime than others.

4. Through our lifestyles, we contribute to our own victimization.

One's lifestyle refers to what a person does during the day and night. Turns out, your lifestyle is a pretty good predictor of criminal victimization. As one example, people with more active lifestyles are more at risk for criminal victimization. As another, going out at night puts you are more risk of drunk driving victimization. Using actual research studies, the book will show further examples of how our lifestyles impact our risk of different kinds of crime.

5. Fear of crime does not the reality of crime.

Generally speaking, people are more afraid of crime than is warranted by crime statistics. People also tend to fear the wrong things. Using survey data and criminological research, the book illustrates how crime and fear of crime do not match.

6. Media coverage of crime is inaccurate.

Media coverage of crime does not match the reality of crime. For example, whereas most crime is committed against people's property, the great bulk of media coverage of crime focuses on violent crime. Murder—the rarest crime of all—tends to receive the largest portion of media coverage. Using examples from both the news and entertainment media, the book shows the specific ways in which media coverage of crime gets the story about crime wrong.

7. Rich people are more dangerous than poor people.

This fact may be seen by some as controversial, but it remains undeniably true. Stated simply, white-collar and corporate crime—those types of crime disproportionately committed by the wealthy—cause more property damage and physical damage than all street crimes combined. Using evidence from criminological studies, the book demonstrates how many more dollars are lost and how many more injuries and deaths are created by acts of the wealthy than acts of the poor.

8. Criminologists are criminals, too.

One of the leading stories in the news currently is a PhD student in criminal justice who allegedly brutally stabbed and murdered four college students as they slept in their beds. And at least one individual with a degree in criminal justice went on to become a serial killer. But, twenty-five years ago, I did a survey of members of the American Society of Criminology where I found that the nation's criminologists admit to a wide variety of crimes of all types. In the book, I show that criminologists commit their fair share of crimes.

9. We understand fully why people commit crime.

There are literally scores of criminological theories currently in existence. Every year, thousands of studies testing these theories are pumped out by criminologists around the world. As such, we fully understand the reasons why people break the law. The book thoroughly summarizes this evidence,

demonstrating to the reader what is known about criminal motivation and the reasons people commit crime.

10. People do not have free will.

The entire criminal justice system operates on the assumption that people have free will. After all, it doesn't make much sense to arrest, convict, and punish people if they are not fully responsible for their actions. Yet, it is now undeniable that our behavior is influenced by many factors beyond our control—from genetics, to brain function, even to environmental factors that we cannot possibly influence, such as the state of the economy. Using real-life examples, the book demonstrates that though humans can choose how to behave, those choices are often made in response to both risk factors (i.e., things that make crime more likely) and protective factors (i.e., things that make crime less likely)—factors that we generally have no control over.

11. The law does not represent the average American.

Who makes the law? Studies show clearly that it is white, older, rich men (WORMs). Using data, the book demonstrates first that lawmakers at both the state and federal level are not demographically representative of the United States, making “sociological representation” impossible. Further, the book illustrates who pays for political campaigns (i.e., the same people), and then reviews studies about whose interests are actually served by the law (i.e., not the average person).

12. The main source of bias in criminal justice comes from the law.

The criminal law defines some acts as illegal while it ignores a much wider variety of behaviors that thus remain legal. It turns out that the criminalization process creates a bias in criminal justice that starts with the law and then can be traced throughout all of criminal justice. The book provides examples of harmful behaviors that are either legal or illegal but not vigorously pursued by criminal justice agencies, and then illustrates how this results in biases based on demographic factors such as race and social class that we see in criminal justice statistics.

13. People generally don't know their rights or what they mean.

The Bill of Rights to the US Constitution lays out most of the rights that Americans tend to take for granted. Using evidence from real-world surveys, the book shows that the typical American is not familiar with these rights, and moreover, they cannot tell you from where those rights come. The implications of this for justice are also discussed.

14. We make unreasonable demands on police officers.

Believe it or not, there are ideals of police behavior that come from documents such as the Law Enforcement Code of Conduct. Among other things, these documents specify that police officers must live unsullied lives and their behavior must always be beyond reproach, even while off duty. The book lays out the expectations that we have of police officers and then illustrates the different ways in which these expectations are unreasonable for any human being.

15. The average police officer does very little work related to crime.

Take your typical ten-hour shift and the average police officer will average about one call total that has anything to do with crime. The book will show that, in fact, police spend the great bulk of their time *not* dealing with criminal matters, but instead with serving the public and engaging in routine administrative duties.

16. Policing only has a modest effect on crime rates.

Numerous studies have examined the effects of police on crime, and they tend to conclude that policing only has a modest impact on it. The book reviews these studies and shows the ways that policing does impact crime rates as well as ways in which it could, should we shift the focus of policing from reactive strategies such as random patrol to more proactive strategies such as problem-oriented policing.

17. Relative to police and corrections, courts are underfunded and understaffed.

Data on dollars spent on justice-related activities in the United States show that policing receives about 49 cents for every dollar we spend, and corrections receive about 29 cents per dollar; this leaves courts with the final 22 cents per dollar. This is incredible since it is the courts that actually determine the legal guilt or innocence of criminal suspects; it's as if we are more concerned with catching and punishing someone than we are of catching and punishing the right person! The book examines criminal justice spending as well as staffing and then examines the implications for justice for the realities outlined in the book.

18. All justice goes through the prosecutor.

Since the prosecutor has sole responsibility for deciding whether to press charges or not, as well as which charges, the prosecutor is the most powerful member of the courtroom. Stated simply, if the prosecutor decides *not* to press charges in case, there is no work needed for a defense attorney or a judge. As such, all justice goes through the prosecution. The book examines this issue and discusses the implications for justice of a court system imbalanced in the favor of one courtroom actor.

19. Almost no one charged with a crime gets a trial.

Even for serious crimes like felonies, only about 5 percent of such cases are handled via criminal trial; the rest are resolved by plea bargaining. Though no one seems to be in favor of the practice (conservatives hate it because it results in less justice than is demanded by the law and liberals hate it because it is not consistent with the due process rights that Americans enjoy), it is the standard operating procedure for courts in America. The book explores this issue and then illustrates the various ways in which plea bargaining is inconsistent with justice.

20. Rich people have a separate court system from the rest of us.

The famous wedding cake model is examined in the book, showing that the great bulk of cases against poor and middle-class Americans are handled via

plea bargaining, whereas wealthy people routinely get full and often lengthy criminal trials. This results in a dual court system where rich folks can expect criminal trials in the face of serious criminal charges but the rest of us cannot. Implications for justice are laid out in the book.

21. Juries predetermine guilt and punishment, and there are many other problems associated with juries.

Both studies of actual juries (e.g., the Capital Jury Project) and from mock juries show the juries routinely make up their minds both about suspects' guilt as well as about potential punishment prior to the conclusion of criminal trials. Evidence to this effect is reviewed in the book and implications for justice are fully considered. Other significant problems with juries are also identified and discussed.

22. Prisons are destructive to human beings.

The "pains of imprisonment" are well known in criminology. Each of these losses and negative experiences faced by inmates is identified and discussed in the book. The bottom line is that prisons are horrible places to be, and given that the United States locks up more people than any other country in the world, this is an important issue to understand.

23. Incarceration has little impact on crime.

The impact prisons have on crime has been widely studied. The book reviews this evidence and shows that prisons have very little (and often inconsistent) impacts on crime. Reasons this is so are examined, and suggestions to make prisons more effective are offered, based on criminological research.

24. The death penalty does not deter murder.

For punishment to deter, it must be certain (i.e., likely to happen), swift (i.e., applied quickly after a crime), and severe (i.e., bad enough to outweigh any potential benefit from criminal activity). In reality, though the death penalty is undeniably severe (in that it takes the life of an offender), it is both uncertain and incredibly slow. Using data, the book shows that far less than one percent of killers are even sentenced to death and the average time

offenders spend on death row prior to execution is currently twenty years. The book then examines studies of criminological leaders and death penalty experts, showing that none of them believes the death penalty is a deterrent to murder.

25. The drug war is a failed policy.

We've been fighting a drug war officially since at least 1971, when it was first declared by President Richard Nixon. Though stated goals of the drug war change with each new President, the goals generally pertain to reducing drug use and abuse, reducing drug availability through market disruption, healing drug users through drug treatment, and reducing the health and social costs associated with drugs. Using data and studies, the book shows that the American drug war has consistently failed to achieve any of these goals, and that the White House and Congress know about this, yet keep funding the drug war with ever increasing budgets.

Contribution to the Field

"Lessons in Criminology and Criminal Justice" contributes to the knowledge in Criminology and Criminal Justice by briefly summarizing what is known in several areas, including crime, policing, courts, and corrections. The book will be a vital resource for the introductory student as well as the lay person who wants to quickly locate important facts of crime and justice. Further, the perspective of the book is unlike any other book on the market, as the author analyzes important issues such as how factors such as social class and race impact crime. The book does not shy away from potentially controversial topics such as these, and is not afraid to make claims that some may find controversial, even though each is rooted in hard facts.

CHAPTER 1

LESSON #1.

CRIME IS INVENTED SO WE CAN HAVE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE CRIME AS WE WANT

Crime comes from the criminal law, which is written by human beings. As a result, crime is invented by people. This is not to say that there is no violence and property taking in nature; of course, there is. It is just that none of that violence is criminal! Take this example: On the plains of Africa, lions kill zebras. But that act is not murder; zebras don't call the zebra police when such an act occurs. Instead, such killing is just part of nature—predators killing prey—for survival. Only in human societies is the killing of one person by another a crime, and then, only under certain circumstances; there are situations where killing a human is legally permissible, such as in the case of self-defense. Similarly, when a squirrel steals a nut from another squirrel, it does not amount to the crime of theft; that's just nature! In this chapter, I examine this issue and discuss its implications.

Since crime comes from the criminal law, this means anything can be a crime, and nothing—no matter how immoral or harmful it is—is automatically a crime. Stated simply, for an act to be a crime, there must be a criminal law which prohibits the behavior. Absent a law, there is no crime. And for someone to be held responsible for breaking that law, the law must be in place prior to the behavior occurring, per the “no ex post facto law” requirement in criminal law; you can't be held responsible for a behavior if it becomes illegal *after* you do it. As an example, in the state of Florida, a boy killed his mother and, before disposing the body, the boy's friend engaged in sexual relations with the corpse. At the time of the act, it was actually not illegal in the state to commit such an offense. Later, in response to learning of the act, the legislature of the state made it a crime. The young man who committed the act could not be held responsible for it since it was

not illegal at the time! He was, of course, held responsible for his role in the murder.

One outcome of the reality that crimes come from the law is that there are many crimes that are silly and unnecessary. Some examples are shown in Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Loony Laws and Silly Stautes

- In Vermont, it is against the law to jump from a plane unless it is a true emergency.
- In Maine, it is a crime to walk down the sidewalk with your shoelaces untied.
- In Washington, it is against the law to pretend that your parents are rich.
- In Kentucky, it is a crime to use a reptile as part of a religious service.
- In Massachusetts, it is against the law to eat peanuts while in church.
- In New Jersey, it is a crime to slurp soup.
- In Indiana, it is against the law to shoot open a can of soup.
- In Rhode Island, it is a crime to throw pickle juice on a trolley.
- In Minnesota, it is against the law to dance in public places.
- In Kentucky, it is a crime to remarry the same man four times.
- In Colorado, it is against the law to throw shoes at a wedding.
- In Missouri, it is a crime to carry a bear down the highway unless it is caged.
- In Washington, it is against the law to punch a bull in the nose.
- In Texas, it is against the law to milk someone else's cow.
- In Ohio, it is a crime to fish with explosives.

Source: Lindsell-Roberts, S. (1994). Loony laws and silly statutes. New York: Sterling Publications.

You may ask yourself, why are such behaviors illegal? It is likely that someone actually committed these acts, and lawmakers found them immoral and/or harmful and thus worthy of criminalization. Again, all that is needed to make a behavior a crime is the passage of a criminal law. In North

Carolina, legislators recently made it illegal to cuss in front of a dead body! I imagine they must have had complaints from morticians or funeral directors about this happening so much that they lobbied the general assembly to make it a crime.

We can thus prevent crime by making less things legal! This is what has happened with regard to recreational use of marijuana, now legal in 21 states—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington! Further, so-called medical marijuana is now legal in 37 states—Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia (Avery, 2023). In each of these states, it is now legal to possess and use marijuana under certain circumstances. The result is that these states now have less marijuana crimes now than they did before legalization. The lesson? Legalization is crime prevention!

No one would like ever suggest legalizing serious crimes such as murder, something along the lines as what is shown in the film, “The Purge.” But, as it turns out, there are very serious acts that lead to the loss of life that, generally speaking, are not illegal. Take tobacco as one example. Selling tobacco and using tobacco are not illegal. Yet, the product kills 480,000 Americans a year (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). This is far more—29 times more—than the 16,425 than were murdered in 2019 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020). Yet, the criminal justice system does not pursue the actions that cause the deaths due to the fact that they are not illegal. The same is the case for the 325,000 deaths caused by medical treatment and infection, the 291,000 deaths caused by poverty and income inequality, the 250,000 deaths caused by hospital error, the 100,000 deaths caused by adverse reactions to prescriptions, the 55,000 deaths caused by pollution, the 54,000 deaths caused by hazardous working

conditions, the 45,000 deaths caused by lack of health insurance, and the 20,000 deaths caused by defective products (Robinson, 2020)!

Even though there are specific actions that could be criminalized when it comes to such behaviors, we have not made them illegal for a wide variety of reasons. And even in cases where the behaviors are illegal, sometimes we decide *not* to pursue them through the criminal law. Take the example of defective ignition switches used in General Motors automobiles (Robinson, 2020). Its cars featured a part in the ignition system that was too short to prevent car from turning itself off by “accident.” When car turns off, the car keeps moving but the steering wheel locks, the breaks don’t work, the seatbelts don’t work, and the airbags don’t deploy after impact. GM reportedly discovered this defect in 2005 but did not tell the government—in violation of the law—and it was not discovered by regulators. A recall did not happen until 2014. In the interim, the defects led to the deaths of 124 people and injured hundreds more.

Rather than arresting those who knew about the defect, convicting them, and sending them to prison, GM entered into deferred prosecution agreement with US Justice Department, meaning it would not be prosecuted as long as it fixed the problem, agreed to never do it again, and paid a fine as well as restitution to the victims. CEO Mary Barra said that she offered her “sincere apologies to everyone who has been affected by this recall, especially to the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured. I am deeply sorry.” And GM admitted that “from in or about the spring of 2012 through in or about February 2014, GM failed to disclose a deadly safety defect to its U.S. regulator... It also falsely represented to consumers that vehicles containing the defect posed no safety concern.” GM paid a \$900 million dollar fine and agreed to pay \$600 million in compensation to victims, But again, there were no arrests, no convictions, and no incarcerations (Robinson, 2020).

There are also forms of fraud that lead to at least \$1 trillion in losses that are not generally pursued by criminal justice agencies (Robinson, 2020). Why this is so is beyond the scope of this book, but the point is that *not* all harmful behaviors are illegal, and even when they are, they are not always pursued

by agencies of criminal justice. A potential reason this is so is reviewed in Lesson #11.

The point of all of this is that crime is invented so we can have as much or as little crime as we want. Given this, I would call on legislators to review all harmful behaviors and then decide which of them are actually worthy of being criminalized. I suspect that a review of the evidence with regard to which behaviors are actually harmful and which are not would lead to a whole new set of crimes that are currently legal and a reduction of crimes for some that are currently illegal. As one example, I would think that the drugs we define as illegal and the drugs we define as legal should be switched, since the latter cause so much more damage than all illicit drugs combined. If we define things as crimes and serious crimes based on how much harm they actually cause, a major overhaul of the criminal law is in order.

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CHAPTER 2

LESSON # 2.

RELATIVE TO THE SIZE OF THE POPULATION, THERE IS VERY LITTLE SERIOUS CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES

In a country with more than 332 million people, less than 20,000 are murdered each year, meaning 99.994% of Americans are not killed by crime. Further, only about 5 million are victims of violent crime, with less than 1 million actually being injured by serious street crime. Though you wouldn't know it by watching the news, even serious street crimes are very uncommon in the United States. This issue is reviewed in this chapter, along with a discussion of why crime is so rare.

The population of the United States in 2021 was about 332 million people (US Census, 2022). Table 2.1 shows the number of victimizations reported by victims in 2021. As you can see, crimes against property are far more common than violent crimes. Further, theft is the most common crime in America. As for violent crimes, a large majority (3,043,190) of them are referred to as simple assaults rather than aggravated assaults. The difference between simple assaults and aggravated assaults is that the latter are committed with weapons and/or are intended to inflict severe bodily harm. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2023) defines aggravated assault as “an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.”

Table 2.1 Number of Victimizations Reported by Victims, 2021

Property crime	11,682,060
Theft	9,323,040
Burglary	1,142,900
Motor vehicle theft	558,670
Violent crime	4,598,310
Assault	3,809,530
Robbery	464,280
Sexual assault	324,500

Source: Thompson, A., and Tapp, S. 2022. "Criminal Victimization, 2021."
Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv21.pdf>

We can calculate one's relative risk of being a victim of crime by dividing the number of victimizations by the size of the US population. Those data are shown in Table 2.2. As you can see, only about 3.5% of the US population was the victim of a property crime in 2021, and even less (1.4%) were victims of violent crimes. The most likely crime to impact someone was theft (2.8%) and the most likely violent crime to happen to someone was assault (1.1%); again, the majority of those assaults were simple and not aggravated.

Table 2.2 Percentage of Victimizations Reported by Victims, 2021

Property crime	3.5%
Theft	2.8%
Burglary	0.34%
Motor vehicle theft	0.17%
Violent crime	1.4%
Assault	1.1%
Robbery	0.14%
Sexual assault	0.10%

Source: Thompson, A., and Tapp, S. (2022). "Criminal Victimization, 2021."
Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv21.pdf>

A couple of important points about the table. First, you notice that the crime of murder is not included in the table, and that is because these data come from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), a measure of crimes reported by victims (dead people obviously cannot report their murder victimizations to researchers). Second, it should be pointed out that not all victimizations are known to victims or reported to researchers as part of the NCVS. The crime of sexual assault stands out as a crime that is likely much more common than is reflected in crime statistics.

With these points in mind, it is still clear that criminal victimization, and especially serious criminal victimization, is very rare in the United States. You would not likely know this if you regularly watch the news and/or interact with entertainment media—given that it tends to overwhelmingly focus on crime and criminal victimization (Robinson, 1998) (see Lesson #6)—yet, it remains true that one’s odds of being victimized are generally quite small in the US.

Criminological theory can help us understand why this is so. First, most Americans are meaningfully connected to society, and social bonding theory posits that our various bonds to society prevent us from committing crime (Robinson and Beaver, 2020). Since we commit so little crime, very few people, relatively speaking, are victims of it. Second, Americans take precautions to lower their risks of crime by locking their doors when they go to work, investing in alarm systems to protect their property, and generally avoiding dicey situations that make them feel unsettled and at risk for crime. Many Americans are unable to do this, for various reasons, and, as such, their risks for criminal victimization are much higher (see Lesson # 3), but overall, serious criminal victimization is thankfully very low.

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CHAPTER 3

LESSON #3.

CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IS HEAVILY CONCENTRATED IN CERTAIN SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION

Close your eyes and picture a crime victim. Unless you saw a young, African American male, you did not see an accurate picture of who tends to be most victimized by street crime in the United States. Criminologists have clearly explained why this is so. This chapter examines why this is true.

Table 3.1 illustrates rates of criminal victimization per 1,000 people ages 12 and older for the years 2020 and 2021. As you can see, only about 16 people per 1,000 (1.6%) were victims of violent crime in those years. Further, between 0.5 and 0.6% were victims of violent crime excluding assault.

Table 3.1. Rate of violent victimization, by type of crime and demographic characteristics of victims, 2020 and 2021

Victim demographic characteristic	2020	2021	2020	2021
	Total violent crime		Violent crime without simple assault	
Total	16.4	16.5	5.6	5.6
Sex				
Male	16.6	17.5	5.1	4.9
Female	16.2	15.5	6.2	6.2
Race/Hispanic origin				
White	16.2	16.1	5.3	5.4
Black	17.5	18.5	7.5	7.7
Hispanic	15.9	15.9	5.5	5.4
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	7.5	9.9	1.8	2.9
Other	49.0	45.1	18.7	9.6
Age				
12–17	17.4	13.2	5.7	4.0
18–24	29.6	23.1	11.8	11.9
25–34	21.4	22.0	9.0	8.3
35–49	18.3	19.4	5.5	6.1
50–64	14.6	16.9	4.0	3.8
65 or older	4.5	6.4	1.6	2.2

Victim demographic characteristic	2020	2021	2020	2021
	Total violent crime		Violent crime without simple assault	
Marital status				
Never married	23.9	22.2	9.4	8.5
Married	9.3	9.5	2.2	2.6
Widowed	6.8	10.7	2.8	3.3
Divorced	24.1	27.4	7.7	8.2
Separated	42.1	36.8	18.9	15.5
Household income				
Less than \$25,000	27.4	29.6	11.4	11.7
\$25,000–\$49,999	17.2	16.9	5.8	5.9
\$50,000–\$99,999	14.4	14.6	5.0	4.3
\$100,000–\$199,999	11.8	12.2	3.4	3.9
\$200,000 or more	13.3	9.7	2.8	2.9

Source: Thompson, A., and Tapp, S. (2022). “Criminal Victimization, 2021.” Accessed February 5, 2023. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv21.pdf>

Using the table, we can conclude that the risk of criminal victimization is higher for some people than others. Starting with sex of victims, there is virtually no difference in violent victimization between men and women. With regard to race, people who consider themselves “Other” (i.e., not White, Black, Hispanic) have the highest rates of victimization, followed by Blacks, then Whites, then Hispanics. With regard to age, the highest rates of victimization are for young people, especially 18 to 24 year olds, and the lowest (by far) are for people 65 years or older. With regard to marital status, the lowest rates of violence victimization are for married people as well as those who are widowed, whereas the highest rates of violence victimization are found for separated people and then divorced/never married individuals. Finally, there is a pretty clear inverse relationship between household income and violent crime victimization, meaning that as income increases, the risk of violence victimization goes down; the highest rates of violence victimization are for people making less than \$25,000 per year.

Criminological theory can help us explain these realities. For example, why are poor people more likely to suffer from victimization than wealthy people? The reason is that they find themselves living in the conditions that most typically lead to crime, in the environments that are most criminogenic. Take the theory of social disorganization as one example. Social disorganization is a theory of crime that focuses primarily on neighborhood characteristics such as poverty, residential mobility or immigration, racial or ethnic heterogeneity, population density, physical disorder or incivilities, and family conditions such as family disruption or single-parent families (Snipes, Bernard, and Gerould, 2019). These things are considered risk factors for crime. The theory has relevance for making sense out of why some people, such as the poor, have higher rates of criminal victimization. Stated simply, poor people and people of color are more likely to reside in conditions of social disorganization.

This is the same reason for why certain races are more prone to criminal victimization; they reside in the places where crime is most common. Further, when some groups, such as African Americans, experience conditions of social disorganization, they tend to do so in a much more perverse way than Whites. As an example, Black poverty is more concentrated than White poverty; White poverty is more dispersed across

residential areas (Sampson, 1995; Sampson and Wilson, 2000). In fact, one study found that the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in a major city were almost entirely comprised of Black residents (Wilkstrom and Loeber, 2000). Though there may be lifestyle differences between Whites and people of color that may help explain differential rates of criminal victimization (see Lesson #4), there are also structural conditions that produce victimization differences, as well.

Why are young people more likely to be victimized by crime? It is because they are also the ones who most commit it, based on the “age-crime curve” that shows crime tends to peak between the ages of 15 and 25 years (Robinson and Beaver, 2020). Figure 3.1 shows an example of the age-crime curve from actual research. Note how, in this research example, crime peaks in the early 20s, in the period known as late adolescence, and then declines precipitously thereafter. Young people are not only more prone to committing crimes during this time, but are also more likely to be victimized by it.

And why are unmarried people so prone to victimization? It turns out that marriage is a protective factor from crime, meaning it lowers one’s risk of criminal victimization. Research shows that marriage is a “stake in conformity,” something that offenders don’t want to lose by committing criminal acts. Married people tend to live more reserved lifestyles and stop doing things like going out and drinking heavily (see Lesson #4). Married people also tend to make new, non-criminal friends after getting married (Laub and Sampson, 2006). Each of these is a reason for lowered involvement in crime, as well as lowered criminal victimization.

You’ve seen in this chapter that one’s risk for criminal victimization is highly related to demographic characteristics. And it is clear that criminal victimization is heavily concentrated in certain segments of the population.