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Book Review of A General Theory of Crime

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Book Review

A GENERAL THEORY OF CRIME. By Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Cal. 94305-2235. 1990. 297 pages. \$39.50 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

The cure for crime is hidden away somewhere with the cure for cancer and divorce. Would that somebody, anybody, knew it.

—Rheta Grimsley Johnson

A great many people will be angry when they read *A General Theory of Crime*. Law-enforcement professionals will be furious with the discussion of the origins of crime and the authors' view of the efforts wasted in massive law-enforcement techniques. Critics of the law-enforcement profession will be just as angry at *A General Theory of Crime*, but their ire will be directed against the discussion of the limited social reforms likely to have an impact on crime and those who commit crime.

Crime in the United States

Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirsch define crime as “acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest.”¹ This provides a good working definition in considering both the available criminal justice statistics and the scholarly research in the area. In analyzing crime, however, the authors destroy some popular and well-entrenched myths about the causes of crime, the people who commit crimes, and what can be done about them. They point out that contrary to the law-enforcement officer's view of crime as a “glamorous and profitable” alternative to legal work, the fact is that crime is “largely petty, typically not completed, and usually of little lasting or substantial benefit to the offender.”² The authors take the view that most crimes involve virtually no planning and, instead, are committed by immature individuals who seek, on the spur of the moment, self-gratification through the criminal act.

On the subject of white-collar crime, the authors respond specially to allegations of illegal activities running rampant in the business world. They methodically detail the facts, which

¹ M.R. Gottfredson & T. Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime* 15 (1990).

² *Id.* at 21.

indicate that the actual incidence of crime is considerably below what the public has been led to believe. For example, while many would claim that theft is widespread among employees of businesses, the authors write that a few individuals commit relatively small numbers of crimes involving employment theft. At the other end of the spectrum where one finds violent crime, they take on the prevailing notion "of organized criminal gangs toiling long and hard with extraordinary competence."³ They conclude that there is little more than anecdotal support for such a notion and that gang members are, in fact, less committed to their leaders and to their gangs than was previously thought. Moreover, the gangs themselves are not terribly well organized in most areas.

A General Theory of Crime makes clear that crime, particularly violent crime, is the province of the young. Indeed, serious crimes typically decline sharply with the age of the offender. When offenders reach the age of 25–30, the crime rates for such individuals drop dramatically.⁴ The authors emphasize throughout "the ordinary character of ordinary crime: no planning, no skill, no organization, no resources, no success."⁵ They combat the conventional wisdom of efficiently organized criminal institutions, sophisticated career criminals, and remarkably successful individuals who think through carefully their unlawful endeavors.

The Numbers

For those not involved in the field of law enforcement or criminology, the greatest contribution of the authors may well be their anecdotal information concerning crime. For example, violent crimes, such as rape, assault, and robbery generally occur in a small number of hours late at night and early in the morning.⁶ Most such crimes occur in public places. Not surprisingly, there are generally higher crime rates for large cities. The victims of such crimes are, in terms of demographic characteristics, quite similar to those who commit the crimes. They tend to be male,

³ *Id.* at 206.

⁴ *Id.* at 267.

⁵ *Id.* at 269.

⁶ *Id.* at 16.

young, from minority groups, and of very low income.⁷ Some of the numbers truly are remarkable. For example, in the case of homicides, the offenders are about 90 percent male and 50 percent minority.

In the nonviolent crime area, the average loss from robbery and theft tends to be remarkably small. The authors write, for example, that the median loss per robbery is less than \$50, and the median loss for each burglary is about \$100.⁸ Accepted views as to car thefts are also strongly challenged. Most car thefts occur at night, and more than three quarters of stolen cars are, in fact, recovered. The law-enforcement community has consistently argued that cars are stolen for parts, but, in fact, the authors demonstrate that there is no evidence to support this view.⁹ Throughout their discussion of statistics regarding crime, the authors establish a good base for a more sober view of the facts. They are careful to caution the reader to avoid being misled by “rare but highly publicized events,” such as well-organized criminal rings obtaining very large booty from thefts.

While much of the news in *A General Theory of Crime* is good—extreme interpretations of statistics are put to rest and theories of almost superhuman criminals and well-organized criminal activities are destroyed—there is much in this book to give pause to anyone concerned with crime. For example, the homicide rate in the United States is by far the highest in the western world, somewhere between 8 and 10 killings per 100,000 people per year. Most of these killings, about 60 percent are committed with firearms. Moreover, there is great concern over the very large number of crimes, including aggravated assaults, robberies, rapes, and burglaries, not being reported to the police. Between 40 to 50 percent of all of these crimes committed in the United States do not get reported.

The numbers indicate that there is little reason to believe widespread media reports that criminals engage in illegal activity as a source of employment-like income to get rich. As the authors frequently note, few criminals get rich even when successful. For example, those who try to sell stolen goods typically make only about ten cents on the dollar and do so at very great risk.

⁷ *Id.* at 17.

⁸ *Id.* at 18.

⁹ *Id.* at 35.

Causes of Crime

The authors spend a good deal of time reviewing the research done by others on the causes of crime. They conclude that each discipline looking at the causes of crime has answered the central question by looking to its own basic concepts: "Thus sociology looks to social class, culture, and organization; psychology looks to personalities; biology looks to inheritance; and economics looks to employment or work."¹⁰ One of the real joys of *A General Theory of Crime* is that the book avoids the trap of focusing only on one particular discipline. Instead, the authors attempt to identify much more broadly the individuals who are committing crimes, and they set up a basis for understanding why these crimes are committed and what can now be done. For the authors, considering the U.S. criminal, this individual "is neither [a] diabolical genius . . . nor [an] ambitious seeker of the American dream."¹¹ Instead, the typical offender in virtually every crime category is someone who has little control over his desires, and this lack of self-control leads that person to look for the desire of the moment; the need for self-gratification from criminal activity appears to be high for such individuals:

People who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts.¹²

Those who commit crimes tend not to be successful in life generally. These individuals are more involved in accidents. They have far more serious illnesses, and they die younger than the general population. They have a difficult time getting and holding jobs, have a hard time acquiring and retaining friends, and tend not to be successful in long-term relationships, particularly family relationships. The kind of person who commits a crime is not doing so as a long-term alternative to stable employment, the authors argue.¹³ Instead, much of the criminal behavior model can simply be explained with the statement that

¹⁰ *Id.* at xiv.

¹¹ *Id.* at xv.

¹² *Id.* at 90.

¹³ *Id.* at 20.

“criminal acts provide *immediate* gratification of desires.”¹⁴ The offenders are not concerned with long-lasting profit or conditions in society. They are simply attempting to receive instant recognition and gratification. With this notion carefully in mind, then, it becomes clear to the authors that the major focus on dealing with crime should be when supporting thoughtful and careful parenting and teaching individuals self-control¹⁵:

The search for personality characteristics common to offenders has thus produced nothing contrary to the use of low-self-control as the primary individual characteristic causing criminal behavior. People who develop strong self-control are unlikely to commit criminal acts throughout their lives regardless of their other personality characteristics. In this sense, self-control is the only enduring personal characteristic predictive of criminal (and related) behavior. People who do not develop strong self-control are more likely to commit criminal acts, whatever the other dimensions of their personality.¹⁶

Moreover, the authors make clear that the development of self-control must start at a very young age. They look to the first six or eight years of life as a time when standards and values concerning self-control are forever etched on the personalities and psyches of individuals.¹⁷

What to Do

A General Theory of Crime forcefully argues that the only true way to combat crime is to focus on ways of developing individual self-control. If they are right—and their argument is most convincing—other theories of dealing with crime are not likely to have much of an impact because these theories identify the wrong issue. For example, the authors contend that modifications of the criminal justice system will have virtually no impact on the crime problem because such modifications ignore the

¹⁴ *Id.* at 89 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 106.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 111.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 272. The authors note that various ethnic groups in our society (and in other countries as well) have very different crime rates. For example, crime rates for Japanese-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and Chinese-Americans are typically considerably lower than for the total population. The authors look to these rates not to demonstrate that ethnic differences result in different crime rates, but to argue that the research in this area “should focus on differential child-rearing practices.” *Id.* at 153.

issue of self-control by individuals.¹⁸ Many of the particular practices of law-enforcement organizations in the United States, in the author's view, are expensive, misdirected, and counterproductive. They detail, in particular, large-scale sting operations to combat stolen property crimes,¹⁹ undercover work to nip organized crime activities in the bud,²⁰ and the massive infusion of police personnel to respond to gang and other organized crime. They argue that these activities have not worked and will not work.²¹ These should all be troubling conclusions for those who

¹⁸ We see little hope for important reductions in crime through modifications of the criminal justice system. We see considerable hope in policies that would reduce the role of the state and return responsibility for crime control to ordinary citizens.

Id. at xvi. Undoubtedly, the most striking argument for making changes in the criminal justice system was recently put forth by the National Rifle Association (NRA). In full-page ads that ran in newspapers throughout the United States, the NRA argued against further gun-control statutes and noted that the following changes would support "what America believes really reduces violent crime":

- maximum mandatory sentencing for criminals convicted of violent crimes
- no parole for criminals convicted of violent felonies
- no probation for criminals convicted of violent felonies
- no plea bargaining for violent felonies
- tougher bail restrictions for violent felons
- the death penalty for murderers of law enforcement or corrections officers
- more prison space to incarcerate violent felons
- more prosecutors, judges, and court reforms to insure swift, certain justice

U.S.A. Today, May 23, 1990 at 9, § A. Such proposals seem to fly directly in the face of both the statistics compiled by the authors and their underlying explanation of the causes of crime.

¹⁹ Characteristics of thieves may also be inferred from the nature of the materials purchased and offenders arrested in police sting operations, "wherein police pose as thieves and as dealers in stolen property, fences, in order to induce thieves to bring stolen property to them." Because these stings are reported by the police, it appears that a large and thriving market for stolen property of all sorts exists in all metropolitan areas. In fact, however, this market appears to be largely police-generated, since it involves items in which no market, legitimate or illegitimate, ordinarily exists.

M.R. Gottfredson & T. Hirschi, note 1 *supra*, at 212.

²⁰ Although it may be more glamorous and profitable for law enforcement to portray an image of crime as a highly profitable alternative to legal work, a valid theory of crime must see it as it is: largely petty, typically not completed, and usually of little lasting or substantial benefit to the offender.

Id. at 21.

²¹ As our view suggests, no evidence exists that augmentation of police forces or equipment, differential patrol strategies, or differential intensities of surveillance have an effect on crime rates. Also consistent with our view is the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of police undercover activities aimed at identification

have been pushing very hard for increased funding and visibility in the law-enforcement area.

On the other hand, those who have been the sharpest critics of law-enforcement approaches may themselves come under increasing scrutiny as a result of the forceful arguments presented in *A General Theory of Crime*. The authors assert that the evidence concerning rehabilitation is, at best, inconclusive. Because the issue for them is a lack of self-control, they argue that efforts should focus not on rehabilitative efforts *after* the fact but instead “on parents or adults with responsibilities for child-rearing. Such intervention does not suffer from coming too soon or too late in relation to when crime is committed.”²² In addition, on the issue of gun control, the authors have serious doubts as to whether tough gun-control laws would have much impact where the criminal is not a careful planner and where the evidence indicates that there is an easy availability of guns on the underground market. Perhaps most bothersome is their conclusion that few criminals are, in fact, committing illegal acts in order to avoid conditions of harsh poverty or hunger. These individuals may well have alcohol or narcotics problems, but as the authors note (quoting another well-known criminologist), “in point of fact, one thief in a thousand in urban industrial societies steals because he is hungry or cold; color television sets and automobiles are stolen more often than food and blankets.”²³

A New Approach

A General Theory of Crime effectively battles misconceptions about crime, criminals, and appropriate law-enforcement techniques that have all too long dominated thinking in the United States. The authors carefully and methodically explain why the only true basis for viewing crime is to look at an individual's

of professional thieves and fences (the so-called “sting” operations) Such programs make assumptions about offenders (level of skill, organization, and commitment to criminal means of livelihood) that are untrue. The common result of such expensive and time-consuming operations is the capture of a number of ordinary “losers” many of whom may have very low self-control but few of whom, if accurately described by the police in media representations, would engender public support for such programs.

Id. at 270.

²² *Id.* at 269.

²³ *Id.* at 152.

lack of self-control. For the authors, therefore, there can be only one method by which crime will be effectively combatted. Because the major cause of low self-control is ineffective child-rearing in the early years, they contend that the economic and sociological focus in our society should be on effective child rearing. Our system as it exists now goes wrong, they contend, in a number of different places. They set this point out with clarity:

First, the parents may not care for the child (in which case none of the other conditions would be met); second, the parents, even if they care may not have the time or energy to monitor the child's behavior; third, the parents, even if they care and monitor, may not see anything wrong with a child's behavior; finally, even if everything else is in place, the parents may not have the inclination or the means to punish the child.²⁴

The authors recognize changes that have taken place in family structure in recent years and do not claim that only the traditional mother-father, two-parent relationship will be effective in child rearing.²⁵ What they do argue in this outstanding and provocative book, however, is that it is time that we used our resources and our energies to look to the true underlying causes of crime: a breakdown of the family child-rearing responsibility and a loss of self-control of large numbers of members of our society. They are right—it is time to refocus our resources and our energies.

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²⁴ *Id.* at 98.

²⁵ We do not restrict the meaning of “familial institutions” to the traditional family unit composed of a natural father and mother. The socialization function does not, in our view, require such an institution. It does, however, require responsible adults committed to the training and welfare of the child.

Id. at 273 n.2.