
Societal Changes Influence On Crime And Deviance

According to the Oxford Dictionary, 'crime' is defined as "an action that is against the law" or "illegal actions as a whole". (Lexico 2019) This definition could be argued as too simplistic as it does not apply to all criminal offenses. In 1884, the criminal law system was made to reconsider what was seen as a defence to murder, when the case of R v Dudley and Stephens revealed four men had to resort to cannibalism while stranded at sea. This case demonstrates how defining crime so objectively can be complex as although the men involved committed a criminal act, the death penalty they were sentenced to was commuted to six months imprisonment due to the societal norms or customs associated with sailing at sea in the 19th century. Defining crime too objectively or subjectively is an issue, as social deviance does not always result in criminal activity, for example, if an individual has been hired to spray paint public property in contrast to someone spray painting graffiti on public property without permission.

Deviance is defined as "Behaviour which is disapproved of by most people in a society or group, which does not conform to shared norms and values" (Roberts et al, 2014, p.36). Acts such as public indecency and shoplifting are criminal offences and socially deviant behaviour. Deviant behaviour can sometimes be punished by the legal system, as a result, we see the alienation or societal rejection of those who are deviant. This is how social order helps maintain conformity and pushes for social control in two main ways; the first example is formal control, which is typically "carried out by the government, the armed forces and the criminal justice system, including the police, the courts and the prison service" (Roberts et al, 2014, p.36). This type of control tackles deviant behaviour that can cause harm to businesses and the general public by enforcing public laws and ensuring the punishment of those who break them. Informal social control can be seen as more important than formal control, as the behaviours and social rules learned this way have more of a day to day impact. Informal control can be carried out by small communities such as religion, or by the education system or family members.

From a functionalist point of view, a certain amount of crime is beneficial for society as deviance can lead to social change and crime can bring the wider community together. Emile Durkheim (1982) believed that society has a "collective conscience" which develops from a mutual understanding of shared values which help guide the way people act. He believed that crime helps reaffirm the boundaries of society, an explanation of this being "every time a person breaks a law and is taken to court, the resulting court ceremony and the publicity in the newspapers, publicly reaffirms the existing values." (Moore et al, 2006, p.53). He also points out that horrific crimes that have taken place result in a widespread public outrage, strengthening the community. An example of this happening is the 2017 suicide bombing in the Manchester Arena, which resulted in multiple businesses offering the attendees help. Finally, he believed that the levels of sympathy for those who have been prosecuted aid in changing the values of society. Widespread public outcry shows this, and those who are in positions of power such as MP's help change the law. This reflects the changing of values whilst showing that both crime and deviance are social constructs and that these constructs, in most cases, are extremely political.

When focusing more on deviance, Ken Plummer (1979), argues that there are two distinctions between deviance, the first being societal deviance. "Societal deviance refers to behaviour

which breaks the law or which is seen as deviant by most members of society” (Langley et al, 2005, p7). Examples of this include acts such as murder or armed robbery. Society agrees that these acts are both deviant and criminal, and the law ensures that these acts receive harsh punishments. Situational deviance highlights the distinctions of deviance by focusing on the context or the situation. In one society an act may be seen as the norm, however in another society it could be seen as extremely deviant. An example of this is homosexuality, as before the 1960’s sexual relationships between men were deemed deviant and criminal in the United Kingdom, however homosexuality is now widely accepted in a lot of communities, allowing it to become the norm. In other countries or societies however, homosexuality is still criminalised and homosexual acts between men are heavily frowned upon.

Crime and deviance are relative to the norms, values and rules of specific cultures. This example highlights the issues that occur when trying to define deviance, as it is challenging to explain that different subcultures or different areas have different definitions and examples of deviance that may differ from those of a wider society. These groups or subcultures can potentially develop norms that may be at odds with a wider society and can possibly see societally deviant behaviour as acceptable. Situational deviance occurs quite often, for example violence and the use of fire arms is seen as acceptable to gangs but is seen as deviant and sometimes criminal to those from a wider society.

Legal deviance is arguably the most widely accepted form of deviance, as the actions that fit into this definition are solely considered as abnormal or are frowned upon but do not break the law and are unable to be punished as such. This subtype could be compared to informal deviance, which violates the norms of society that are not coded into law. Examples of this are belching or picking your nose, which can also be described as rude behaviour. Open or public deviance links into both of these categories by being defined as a group of people who do not conform towards the views of a wider society. This, in turn, can create subcultures which may have a different definition to deviance altogether such as gangs or cults. Illegal deviance intertwines with the law, as the acts that fall under this this category are criminal and will be prosecuted against if the individual is caught performing an illegally deviant act. You could compare illegal deviance to formal deviance since an act that violates a formally enacted law, such as theft, murder or rape fits into both categories. This description defines formal deviance, however and highlights the fine line between deviant behaviour and criminal behaviour. Individuals who participate in deviant behaviour but choose to conceal it from a wider society fall under private deviance. Several reasons could be behind the individual’s choice to hide their deviance such as embarrassment or shame. Some would say private and secret deviance are similar since both are hidden away from others. Whether they are societal rules or legal rules, secret deviance actively goes against them, meaning these acts can be illegal. A legal example of secret deviance is cheating, which most societies frown upon and an illegal example is the possession of child pornography, which is punishable by law.

Crime statistics are a way of recording crimes. There are a number of ways to do this, the first way being police records. Police records provide the public with official statistics of crime that are analysed, available for free and can be accessed online by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website. Because these records are published by the police, the statistics are up to date and the statistics cover the whole of the UK. (Roberts et al, 2014, p.37). However, according to the ONS website “police recorded crime statistics do not provide a reliable measure of levels or trends in crime” (Crime in England and Wales 2018). These limitations raise some concerns such as their inability to measure and record unreported or undetected crimes and that they do

not provide information such as the offenders employment status. Self-report studies focus on asking people if they have committed a crime and if so, which. There are flaws to this method, the main one being that some people might lie about the crimes they have committed. This could be due to embarrassment or to them not seeing that particular crime as an offense, however both of these reasons decrease the validity of attempting to record crime this way. These surveys also fail to address white collar crime, as well as some areas of society all together, crimes that take place in employment. Another way to record crime is by looking at victim surveys. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is carried out yearly and focuses on those who have been the victims of crimes. Issues that come with these surveys are that they do not include crimes that have no victims, such as shoplifting. Another issue these surveys have is that not everybody responds to them and that in the past only people who were sixteen years old or older were asked to respond to the surveys, decreasing the validity of their results. However, these surveys offer victims a lot more emotional security whilst discussing crimes they were the victims of and respondents may feel more comfortable sharing these incidents this way as opposed to recording them with the police.

In conclusion, it is difficult to define crime and deviance due to the societal changes that occur over time. These changes are subjective to different areas and what one culture define as deviant another culture may not. Crime and deviance are perceived in different ways and there have been many approached formed to try to answer why. These crimes are recorded officially and individually; however, it is not possible to keep track of every offence that takes place.