

Chapter Two

The Basic Myths About Criminals

IN THE 1957 musical *West Side Story*, Stephen Sondheim parodied what then was the current thinking about juvenile delinquency in the song, "Gee, Officer Krupke." Delinquents were punks because their fathers were drunks. They were misunderstood rather than no good. They were suffering from a "social disease," and society "had played [them] a terrible trick." They needed an analyst, not a judge, because it was "just [their] neurosis" acting up. In short, their criminal behavior was regarded as symptomatic of a deep-seated psychological or sociological problem. Little has changed since then in terms of deeply ingrained beliefs about the causes of crime. In this chapter, I shall briefly discuss these beliefs. In subsequent chapters, I shall examine them in greater detail and show that the prevalent thinking about crime has been and still is loaded with fundamental miscon-

ceptions resulting in devastating consequences for society.

When a person commits a particularly sordid crime, his sanity may be questioned. Three men pick up two girls who are thumbing a lift. A joyride turns into a nightmare when the teenagers are driven to a desolate mountainous area where they are bound and repeatedly raped. Two of their tormentors dig a hole and tell them to say their prayers. However, the men decide to prolong the torture and spirit the girls off to an apartment and brutalize them again. The girls are saved by a suspicious neighbor who calls the police. Eventually, the court considers the rapists to be "mentally disordered sex offenders" and sends them to a psychiatric hospital, where they spend less than one-third of the time they would have served in prison.

Criminals learn to fool the psychiatrists and the courts in order to serve "easy time" in a hospital with the prospect of getting out more quickly than they would from a prison. From other criminals and from their attorneys, even unsophisticated street criminals learn the ploy of insanity. The game is for the criminal to convince others that he is sick so that he can beat the charge. After he is admitted to the hospital, he plays the psychiatric game of mouthing insights and behaving properly so that he can convince the staff that he is recovering and deserves to be released.

We, the public, may be so revolted by the gruesomeness of a crime that we conclude that only a sick person would be capable of such an act. But our personal reaction is totally irrelevant to understanding the criminal. True, what these men did to the teenagers is not a normal, everyday event. But the key question is, what are these men really like? A detailed and lengthy examination of the mind of a criminal (which is seldom made) will reveal that it is anything but sick. The criminal is rational, calculating, and deliberate in his actions.

Criminals know right from wrong. In fact, some know the laws better than their lawyers. But they believe that what-

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ever they want to do at any given time is right for them. Their crimes require logic and self-control.

Some crimes happen so fast and with such frequency that they appear to be compulsive. A person may steal so often that others are certain that he is the victim of an irresistible impulse and therefore a "kleptomaniac." But a thorough mental examination would show that he is simply a habitual thief, good at what he does. He can size up a situation at a glance and then make off with whatever he wants. A habit is not a compulsion. On any occasion, the thief can refrain from stealing if he is in danger of getting caught. And if he decides to give up stealing for a while and lie low, he will succeed in doing so.

The sudden and violent crime of passion has been considered a case of temporary insanity because the perpetrator acts totally out of character. But again, appearance belies reality.

A man murders his wife in the heat of an argument. He has not murdered anyone before, and statistical trends would project that he will not murder again. It is true that the date, time, and place of the homicide were not planned. But an examination of this man would show that on several occasions he had shoved her and often wished her dead. In addition, he is a person who frequently had fantasies of evening the score violently whenever he believed that anyone had crossed him. He did not act totally out of character when he murdered his wife. He was not seized by an alien, uncontrollable impulse. In his thinking, there was precedent for such a crime. A person with even worse problems might well have resolved them differently.

If criminals are not mentally ill, aren't they nevertheless victims of poverty, broken homes, racism, and a society that denies them opportunities? Since the late nineteenth century, there has been a prevalent opinion that society is more to blame for crime than the criminal.

Sociologists assert that the inner city youngster responds

with rage to a society that has excluded him from the mainstream and made the American dream beyond his reach. Some even contend that crime is a normal and adaptive response to growing up in the soul-searing conditions of places like Watts and the South Bronx. They observe that in correctional institutions there is a disproportionately large number of inmates who are poor and from minority groups. These inmates are seen as casualties of a society that has robbed them of hope and virtually forced them into crime just so they can survive.

Crime knows no social boundaries, as the rising suburban crime rate demonstrates. Suburban delinquents are also regarded as victims—victims of intense pressures to compete, of materialism, of parents who neglect them, push them to grow up too fast, or are overly protective. These adolescents are perceived as rebelling not only against their parents but against middle-class values, seeking meaning instead through kicks and thrills.

Peer pressure is seen as a critical factor in the lives of youngsters from all social classes who turn to crime. Experts point out that among some subcultures the rewards are for being daring and tough, not for good grades and job promotions. Kids learn about crime from one another; they are schooled in the streets and go along with the crowd in order to acquire self-esteem and a sense of belonging. The belief that crime is contagious like a disease is more than a century old.

Every social institution has been blamed for contributing to crime. Schools have been singled out as forcing into crime youngsters who don't fit the academic mold. Churches have been accused of not providing leadership to wayward youth and to the community at large. Newspapers, television, and the movies have been charged with glamorizing crime. American business and advertising have been accused of contributing to distorted values and therefore to crime.

Economic hard times have been associated with an in-

crease in crime. But then so have good times. Financial pressures are said to push despondent people over the edge. But then, when times are booming it has been thought that the gap between the "haves" and "have nots" widens and the latter, out of resentment, turn to crime. Economic troubles are also seen as contributing to crime by forcing mothers to go to work, further weakening the family. Their children have less supervision and guidance than before and are even more vulnerable to peer pressure.

Sociological explanations for crime, plausible as they may seem, are simplistic. If they were correct, we'd have far more criminals than we do. Criminals come from all kinds of families and neighborhoods. Most poor people are law-abiding, and most kids from broken homes are not delinquents. Children may bear the scars of neglect and deprivation for life, but most do not become criminals. The environment does have an effect, but people perceive and react to similar conditions of life very differently. A family may reside in a neighborhood where gangs roam the streets and where drugs are as easy to come by as cigarettes. The father may have deserted and the mother collect welfare. Yet not all the children in that family are in crime. In suburbia, a family may be close emotionally and well off financially, but that is not enough to keep one of the youngsters from using drugs, stealing, and destroying property.

Criminals claim that they were rejected by parents, neighbors, schools, and employers, but rarely does a criminal say why he was rejected. Even as a young child, he was sneaky and defiant, and the older he grew, the more he lied to his parents, stole and destroyed their property, and threatened them. He made life at home unbearable as he turned even innocuous requests into a battleground. He conned his parents to get whatever he wanted, or else he wore them down through endless argument. It was the criminal who rejected his parents rather than vice versa.

Not only did he reject his family, but he rejected the kids

in the neighborhood who acted responsibly. He considered them uninteresting, their lives boring. He gravitated to more adventurous youngsters, many of whom were older than he. Crime is not contagious like chicken pox. Even in crime-infested neighborhoods, there are youngsters who want no part of the action. Sure there is the desire to belong to the crowd, but the question is, which crowd? Criminals were not forced into crime by other people. They *chose* the companions they liked and admired.

The school does not reject the antisocial youngster until he is impossible to deal with. Many criminals have no use for school whatsoever. Still some remain in school, then use their education to gain entree into circles where they find new victims. More commonly, delinquent youngsters use the classroom as an arena for criminal activity by fighting, lying, stealing, and engaging in power plays against teachers and other pupils. Basically, for them, school is boring, its requirements stupid, the subjects meaningless. Just as the criminal rejects his parents, he does the same to his teachers. It is neither incompetent teachers nor an irrelevant curriculum that drives him out. In fact, the school may offer him an individually tailored program, but no matter what he is offered, it does not suit him. Finally, he is expelled for disruptive behavior or grows so bored that he quits.

The notion that people become criminals because they are shut out of the job market is an absurdity. In the first place, most unemployed people are not criminals. More to the point, perhaps, is that many criminals do not want to work. They may complain that without skills they can't find employment. (Of course, it was their choice not to remain in school to acquire those skills.) But as many a probation officer will observe, in most areas jobs of some sort are available but criminals find them too menial and beneath them.

Some criminals are highly educated and successful at their work. Their very success may serve as a cover for crime. If a person has a solid work record, he is generally regarded as

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responsible and stable. But money, recognition, and power are not enough to make a criminal law-abiding. The point is that what a person's environment offers is not decisive in his becoming a criminal.

The media have been criticized for making crime enticing by glorifying both specific crimes and criminals. There has been intense concern about the high incidence of violence in television programs that reach children. Neither scientific studies nor congressional hearings have shed much light on how much the media contribute to crime. Once again arises the erroneous premise that human character is easily shaped by external events. Television does not make a criminal out of a child; nor do movies, comics, magazines, or books. A person already thinking about committing crimes may pick up ideas from the media or become more certain about the feasibility of a particular crime. (Note the rash of skyjackings following extensive publicity about them during the 1970s.) But a responsible person will not be turned into a criminal by what he watches or reads.

Economic adversity affects us all. We may be pushed to work longer hours or to take a second job. Women who prefer to be at home may have little choice but to go to work. Families may have to make do with less and watch goals slip further out of reach, and people on fixed incomes bear a special burden. The responsible person responds to economic pressures by sacrifice and hard work. Even for him, temptation may be stronger to step outside the law as the economic squeeze grows tighter. Ultimately, however, it comes down to how each person chooses to deal with adversity.

What of the observation that a disproportionate number of people incarcerated for crimes are both poor and from minority groups? This is less a commentary on those groups than on the processes by which the criminal justice system arrests, adjudicates, and confines. If a white upper middle-class youngster is arrested for shoplifting, his parents may hire a lawyer and get the charges dropped by promising that

the boy will visit a counselor. He never sees the inside of a courtroom and his record is clean. The black kid may become a criminal justice statistic. He goes to court, is convicted, then sentenced to a term of probation, and has a criminal record. For a more serious crime, the person with money and connections may get probation while the disadvantaged offender is imprisoned. Perhaps we need to examine the system by which people end up behind bars rather than focus on their color or economic status. It is unwarranted and racist to assume that because a person is poor and black (brown, red, yellow) he is inadequate to cope with his environment and therefore can hardly help but become a criminal.

So far, I have contended that criminals are not mentally ill or hapless victims of oppressive social conditions. But the psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and social workers still would say that a person is what he is largely because of his early experiences. They regard a man's crimes as "symptoms" of conflicts that are rooted in childhood and remain unresolved.

Too long have the social sciences promulgated the view that a human organism comes into the world like a lump of clay to be shaped by external forces. This view renders us all victims! What it does accomplish is to make explanation of behavior relatively easy. If any of us had taken a criminal path, something could be found in our past to explain why we turned out as we did. If your child has problems, you will be faulted for your child-rearing practices, whatever they were. If you were strict, you will be told that your child has been affected by your harshness. If you were permissive, you will be accused of being too indulgent. If you were relatively democratic, you might be considered wishy-washy or even indifferent. Worst of all, you might be tagged as inconsistent, something that we are all guilty of to an extent. Psychology always has a clever theory about any bit of behavior and offers an explanation, but only *after the fact*. There's the old

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line that if a patient arrives late for his psychiatric appointment, he's resistant. If he's early, he's anxious. If he's on time, he's compulsive. Although social scientists are sincere in trying to explain why we are the way we are, they are often incorrect.

In varying degrees, all human beings suffer trauma as they grow up. But if a domineering mother or an inadequate father produce delinquent children, why is it that most children who have such parents aren't criminals? Psychologists stress the importance of parents as role models, especially fathers for their sons and mothers for their daughters. Yet many children with weak or irresponsible role models become honest, productive adults. Conversely, some children with strong, positive role models become criminals.

When they are interviewed after being apprehended, criminals invariably relate a tale of horrors about their early lives. They seize upon any hardships in their lives, real or made up, to justify their acts against society. By portraying themselves as victims, they seek sympathy and hope to absolve themselves of culpability.

Some of society's chronic lawbreakers do come from volatile, conflict-ridden families where they have suffered abuse. But that is likely to be only part of the story. In their accounts, they relate only what others did to them, omitting what they did to make a bad situation even worse. A man may describe savage beatings by a maniacal father, but he never tells what he did to provoke such treatment. He conceals the fact that he taunted, deceived, and defied his parents to the point that his frustrated father finally lashed out at him physically. A complete account might reveal that the criminal was the only child in the family to have received severe corporal punishment, whereas his siblings were generally well-behaved. This is not to defend harshness in discipline. It is, however, to suggest that we ought not to limit our inquiries to what parents have done to children but strive to determine what children have done to their parents. A re-

lated point is that probably most children who are mistreated suffer long-range effects, but not all are criminals.

Criminals contend that their parents did not understand them and failed to communicate with them. They are often believed, and as usual, the deficiency is attributed almost entirely to parents. If we could be invisible observers in the homes of delinquent youngsters, we might reach a different conclusion. As a child, the criminal shuts his parents out of his life because he doesn't want them or anyone else to know what he is up to. When a teenager skips school, hangs out at a pool hall, joyrides, drinks, smokes pot, and steals from stores, it should be no surprise that he tells his parents little about his day. In fact, he will greet parental interest and concern with accusations that the parent is prying into his business. No matter how hard they try, mothers and fathers cannot penetrate the secrecy, and they discover that they do not know their own child. He is the kid who remains the family mystery.

In short, psychological theory, in its current state, is more misleading than illuminating in explaining why people become criminals. Far from being a formless lump of clay, the criminal shapes others more than they do him.

During the nineteenth century, there was a belief among many experts that people were born criminals. Attempts to identify criminals on the basis of facial or other physical features were discredited. However, the "bad seed" hypothesis never died. In the 1960s, for example, a controversy arose over whether criminals have special chromosome patterns. Evidence for an "XYY" syndrome or other chromosome anomaly remains inconclusive.

Another belief is that perhaps criminals suffer from a physiological dysfunction that may be hereditary or result from trauma. Brain lesions or tumors, temporal lobe epilepsy, blood chemistry changes, glandular abnormality, and hypoglycemia are among the organic factors that have been

linked to criminality, but conclusive evidence of such a linkage is still lacking. Of the many people who are afflicted with these conditions, few become criminals.

There has also been a theory that criminals are *inherently* less intelligent than the general population, but this has been laid to rest. Empirical studies of criminals and noncriminals simply did not support such a proposition. Criminals may score low on IQ tests and lack basic information that most people acquire in the primary grades of school. However, their mental acumen and resourcefulness are striking to anyone who is privy to their complex, well-thought-out schemes. Criminals are remarkable in their capacity to size up their environment in order to pursue objectives important to them.

Still the belief lingers, especially among some educators, that criminals have an organically based learning disability. Experts point out that many delinquent youngsters seem *unable* to learn and fall far behind academically. They also observe that among prison inmates there is a sizable number who can neither read nor write. Another deficiency noted is that criminals do not seem to learn from past experiences the way most people do.

There are several problems with the learning disability theory. Many criminals who appear learning disabled are highly capable of learning but simply chose not to because school was incompatible with what they wanted to do. Furthermore, most children who are genuinely disabled in their capacity to learn, while experiencing blows to their self-esteem and severe frustration, don't react to their difficulties by becoming criminals. The observation that criminals have an incapacity to learn from experience is inaccurate. They may not learn what parents and teachers want them to learn, but they do utilize the past as a guide when it matters to them. They learn how to become more successful criminals.

No factor or set of factors—sociological, psychological, or biological—is sufficient to explain why a person becomes a

criminal. So far, the search to pin down causation has been futile. Far more disturbing is that programs, laws, policies, and decisions about how to deal with criminals have been based upon these theories, and this has resulted in a tremendous waste of resources while crime continues in epidemic proportions.

What is clear is that criminals come from a wide variety of backgrounds—from the inner city, suburbia, rural areas, and small towns and from any religious, racial, or ethnic group. They may grow up in closely knit families, broken homes, or orphanages. They may be grade school dropouts or college graduates, unemployed drifters or corporate executives. In most cases, they have brothers, sisters, and next-door neighbors who grew up under similar circumstances but did not become criminals.

Despite a multitude of differences in their backgrounds and crime patterns, criminals are alike in one way: *how they think*. A gun-toting, uneducated criminal off the streets of southeast Washington, D.C., and a crooked Georgetown business executive are extremely similar in their view of themselves and the world. This is not to deny individual differences among criminals in their aesthetic tastes, sexual practices, religious observance, or favorite sports team. But all regard the world as a chessboard over which they have total control, and they perceive people as pawns to be pushed around at will. Trust, love, loyalty, and teamwork are incompatible with their way of life. They scorn and exploit most people who are kind, trusting, hardworking, and honest. Toward a few they are sentimental but rarely considerate. Some of their most altruistic acts have sinister motives.

More than a half-century ago, the noted psychologist Alfred Adler observed, "With criminals, it is different: they have a private logic, a private intelligence. They are suffering from a wrong outlook upon the world, a wrong estimate of their own importance and the importance of other people." Adler went on to say that the criminal's crimes "fit in

with his general conception of life."¹ Implied throughout Adler's writing is the idea that people choose to be criminals, that they are a different breed. Even in 1930, Adler's was a lone voice.

Psychology and sociology long have advanced the view that the criminal is basically like everyone else but has turned antisocial because he has been blocked by others in fulfilling his aspirations. Thus the criminal is perceived as a victim of forces and circumstances beyond his control. Those who hold such a view go a step further, asserting that we are all, in a sense, criminals because we lie, lust, and yield to temptation. But it is absurd to equate the white lie of the responsible person with the gigantic network of lies of the criminal. It is equally absurd to equate a child's pilferage of a candy bar with a delinquent's stealing practically everything that isn't nailed down. At some point, we and the criminal are very different. He is far more extreme in that crime is a way of life, not an occasional aberration. It is misleading to claim that the criminal wants what the responsible person wants, that he values the same things that a responsible person values. Both may desire wealth, but only one will work steadily and earnestly to acquire it and then use it responsibly. The criminal believes that he is entitled to it and grabs it any way he can, not caring whom he injures, and then thirsts for more. Both may desire a family life, but the responsible person shows the give-and-take, the empathy, and the selflessness that family life requires. The criminal pays lip service to love while demanding that his spouse and children place his demands and wishes first.

By taking the position that the criminal is a victim, society has provided him with excuses for crime and thereby supported his contention that he is not to blame. Partly to atone for its alleged injustices to the criminal, society has offered him countless opportunities to "rehabilitate" himself and enter the mainstream. Surprise has given way to despair as the criminal rejects the very opportunities that he rejected

before (work, school, counseling) or else shamelessly exploits them while continuing to commit crimes.

Attempts to improve the environment, no matter how worthwhile, have not altered the criminal's personality. Psychological methods have been equally unsuccessful because therapists have mistakenly utilized concepts and techniques suited to patients with a very different character structure. In the more distant past, castration, lobotomy, and drugs were employed in hopes of altering biological forces within the criminal, but to little avail.

The death knell of rehabilitation having sounded, the pendulum is swinging the other way—to "lock 'em up and throw away the key." Given the high recidivism rate of criminals who were considered rehabilitated, such a sentiment is understandable.

What about the function of punishment? Arrest alone or confinement undoubtedly deters some offenders, but contact with the criminal justice system has little lasting impact on habitual offenders. Warehousing a criminal in an institution gets him off the streets for a while, but one day he will be released to wreak havoc again in society. Because prison is expensive—costing the taxpayer more than a year's tuition at an Ivy League college—and because many prisons are dehumanizing, alternatives to incarceration are being developed. In this effort, rehabilitative proposals are once again being heard, but the term is not being used. Instead, it is "community-based corrections," which features a smorgasbord of offerings—vocational training, schooling, counseling, psychotherapy—as well as accountability to a probation officer. In addition, restitution and community service programs have proliferated as society considers finally not just criminals but people who are truly victims.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The criminal's motivation is to avoid confinement. He sees his probation officer once every couple of weeks for a brief appointment. He may attend some programs if they are

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mandated by the court. And he may make restitution. But his personality does not change.

And so the criminal comes up against a world that either bleeds for him because he is a victim or else wants to remove him from the earth. Criminals have been imprisoned, educated, counseled, preached to, and even executed. But the policies and programs continue to be ineffective, largely because those conceiving and implementing them do not know with whom they are dealing. Decisions are made on the basis of misconceptions in an atmosphere of "do something now and do it fast."

A surprising number of people who deal with criminals do not know how criminals think. How a person behaves is determined largely by how he thinks. *Criminals think differently.* If we are thoroughly familiar with how they think, we are in a far better position to draft legislation, formulate policies, administer programs, render more informed decisions, and be more effective in direct contacts with criminals both in the institutions and in the community.

There is even a ray of hope that we can help some criminals change and become responsible citizens. But to undertake this task we must see the criminal as the problem, not society. Our approach to change must be to help the criminal radically alter his self-concept and his view of the world. Some criminals can be "habilitated," that is, helped to acquire patterns of thinking that are totally foreign to them but essential if they are to live responsibly.