



Inside the Criminal Mind: Revised and Updated Edition

By Stanton Samenow

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

Long-held myths defining the sources of and cures for crime are shattered in this ground-breaking book--and a chilling profile of today's criminal emerges.

About the Author

STANTON E. SAMENOW PhD, is a clinical psychologist who has spent 40 years as a researcher, clinician, consultant, and expert witness specializing in criminal behavior. He has also served as an independent evaluator in adversarial child custody disputes and has been appointed to three presidential task forces on law enforcement, victims' rights, and a drug-free America. Among numerous other national venues, he has appeared on *60 Minutes*, *Oprah*, *Good Morning America*, and *Larry King Live*. In addition to *Inside the Criminal Mind* he is the author of *Before It's Too Late* and *Straight Talk About Criminals*.

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The Basic Myths About Criminals

IN NEARLY A HALF-CENTURY, little has changed in terms of deeply ingrained beliefs about the causes of crime. In the classic, still often performed, 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. In this chapter I shall briefly discuss this proposition. 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 misconceptions resulting in devastating consequences for society.

A man abducts, rapes, and murders a little girl. We, the public, may be so revolted by the gruesomeness of the crime that we conclude only a sick person could be capable of such an act. But our personal gut reaction shows no insight into, or understanding of, what really went on in this individual's mind as he planned and executed the crime. True, what the perpetrator inflicted upon this child is not "normal" behavior. But what does "sick" really mean? A detailed and lengthy examination of the mind of a criminal will reveal that, no matter how bizarre or repugnant the crime, he is rational, calculating, and deliberate in his actions--not mentally ill.

Criminals know right from wrong. In fact, some know the laws better than their lawyers do. But they believe that whatever 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 become convinced 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, skilled at what he does. He can case out a situation with a glance, then quickly 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 imminent 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 has fantasies of evening the score violently whenever he believes that anyone has 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. An individual with even worse problems, but with a different personality makeup, would have resolved them differently. For example, one man whose family I evaluated during a child custody dispute discovered that his wife was spending hours on the Internet involved with a man whom she met and had sex with, then announced her plan to spend the rest of her life with him. Although her husband was emotionally devastated and irate, he neither threatened nor attacked her. He proceeded through the legal system toward divorce and obtaining custody of his daughter.

If criminals are not mentally ill, aren't they nevertheless victims of poverty, divorce, 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. But criminality is not limited to any particular societal group, as the 3.2 million arrests during 1999 demonstrate.

Sociologists assert that the inner-city youngster responds with rage to a society that has excluded him from the mainstream and put 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 correctional institutions contain 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.

Suburban delinquents are also regarded as victims--of intense pressures to compete, of materialism, of parents who neglect them or 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.

If it isn't grinding poverty that causes crime, then its opposite--overindulgence--is cited as the cause. As developing nations become increasingly industrialized and their citizens become prosperous, crimes that were rare burst into headlines. In a Bangkok Post article about two tragic shooting sprees, the writer conjectured that "Western-style teenage crime" was emerging in Thailand because Thai children were so indulged that they would "snap" when confronted by life's hardships. Whether a child is deprived or pampered tells us nothing about how he will turn out. Most children who grow up in poverty and most indulged children become independent, resourceful, and responsible.

What of the observation that a disproportionate number of people incarcerated for crimes are both poor and from minority groups? Does this make a commentary on those groups? Or does it prove that the criminal justice system is racist? To whatever extent inequities exist, they need to be corrected. During the past thirty-three years I have focused on individuals, not groups. While interviewing and evaluating members of various ethnic and racial groups, I have found that in nearly every case members of the offender's own family have been law-abiding. The critical factor in becoming a criminal justice statistic is not race or ethnicity; it is the character of the individual and the choices he makes. It is unwarranted and racist to assume that because a person is poor and black (or brown, red, or yellow) he is inadequate to cope responsibly with his

environment and therefore can hardly help but become a criminal.

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 some subcultures reward being daring and tough, and not living by a work ethic. 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 increase in crime. But then so have good times. Financial setbacks 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 pressures 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.

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 the circumstances he faces.

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 divorced parents are not delinquents. Children may bear the scars of neglect and deprivation for life, but most do not become criminals. The environment does have some effect. For instance, it can provide greater or fewer opportunities for crime to occur--greater or lesser deterrence. 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 may collect welfare. Yet not all the children in that family turn to 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. In an area where firearms and drugs are readily available, most residents choose to use neither. The criminal seizes upon opportunities that others shun. More critical than the environment itself is how the individual chooses to respond to whatever the circumstances are.

We have seen other instances of when a major change in the environment suppresses crime or permits it to flourish even throughout an entire country. When totalitarian governments with their despots fall from power and are replaced by democratic regimes, the citizenry has more freedom. The responsible person has opportunity to develop his talents and pursue interests that he couldn't before. The person who is criminally inclined also has greater freedom and will pursue whatever interests him. This in part explains the surge in crime reported in countries that previously had oppressive governments.

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 are not forced into crime by other people. They choose the companions they like and admire.

The school does not reject the antisocial youngster until he is impossible to deal with. Many criminals have no use for school whatsoever. 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, usually 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 responsible and stable. But even legitimately acquired money, recognition, and power are not sufficient incentives for a criminal to live within the law. The point is that what a person's environment offers or lacks is not decisive in his becoming a criminal.

The public often criticizes the media for making crime enticing by glorifying both specific crimes and criminals. There has long been intense concern about the high incidence of violence in television programs that reach children. In the aftermath of school shootings during the 1990s, television again came under scrutiny for its effect on children. One highly publicized study released in 2000 claimed to support the contention that television causes aggression. But millions of people who frequently watch violence on television dramas, films, documentaries, and newscasts do not enact what they see.

A person already thinking about committing crimes may pick up ideas from the media, or become more confident about the feasibility of a particular crime. Fascinated and excited by the prospect of imitating and getting away with what he has watched on television or in a movie, he perpetrates what has come to be called a "copycat crime." Critical, though, is not what plays on the screen but what lies in the mind of the viewer. Television, movies, video games, magazines, or books will not turn a responsible person into a criminal. To believe otherwise is again to subscribe to the erroneous premise that external events easily shape human

character.

Users Review

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