Labeling Theory

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
People most fear “random crime”
- Patternless: It can happen to anyone
- Increasing: Crime is getting worse
- Pointless: Criminal motives make no sense

But none of these claims are true
- Crime is not random: it is stratified by gender, race, class and age
- Official crime is currently declining
- Criminals have reasons for committing crimes
Violent crime rates, 1973-2002 (NCVS)
Property crime rates, 1973-2005 (NCVS)
Homicide rates for 20th Century

Victimization per 100,000


1.2 4.0 9.7 10.2 5.5

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Homicide victimization by gender & race, 2002 (UCR)

Victimization per 100,000

- Total: 5.6
- Male: 8.8
- Female: 2.6
- White: 3.3
- Black: 20.8
Homicide victimization by age, 2002 (UCR)
Homicides by gender & race of victim & offender, 2002

- Male on male: 65.1%
- Male on female: 22.6%
- Female on male: 9.9%
- Female on female: 2.4%

White on white: 45.7%
Black on black: 41.6%
White on black: 3.2%
Black on white: 8.1%
Other: 1.4%
Labeling theory

- Labeling theory: theory which states that deviance is the consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to an offender; a deviant is an individual to whom the identity “deviant” has been successfully applied.

- Two types of deviance
  - Primary deviance: routine instances of norm violation that may or may not result in labeling
  - Secondary deviance: deviance following and resulting from the label

- Reasons why label may lead to deviance
  1. Cut off from participation in conventional groups
  2. Treatment may produce increasing deviance
  3. Labeled person may believe the label
Deviance by sociology 134 students

- Underage alcohol purchase: 48.2% arrested, 51.8% not arrested, 0% never
- Smoked marijuana: 2.3% arrested, 97.7% not arrested, 0% never
- DUI: 4.7% arrested, 95.3% not arrested, 0% never
- Drag racing: 0.8% arrested, 99.2% not arrested, 0% never
- Driving without license: 2.3% arrested, 97.7% not arrested, 0% never
Deviance by sociology 134 students

- Fake ID: 82.1% (16.3% Arrested), 60.5% (36.7% Not arrested), 16.3% (11.7% Never)
- Shoplifting under $20: 85.9% (40.6% Not arrested), 60.5% (59.0% Never)
- Shoplifting over $20: 59.0% (40.6% Not arrested), 85.9% (59.0% Never)
- Vandalized property: 56.8% (42.4% Not arrested), 59.0% (40.6% Never)
- Stole from hotel room: 56.8% (42.4% Not arrested), 59.0% (40.6% Never)
The Saints and the Roughnecks

- Participant observation study by William Chambliss
- Shows role of class in labeling
- Saints
  - Eight white, upper-middle class boys
  - Constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, theft & vandalism
  - Never arrested
- Roughnecks
  - Six white, lower class boys
  - Engaged in fighting, drinking and theft; less delinquent overall
  - Constantly in trouble with police & community
The Saints and the Roughnecks

Why were the Saints and Roughnecks treated differently?

- Visibility: Saints owned their own cars and were able to leave town
- Demeanor: Saints were apologetic and penitent; Roughnecks hostile and disdainful
- Bias: Community is biased against type of delinquency committed by Roughnecks

The delinquent label reinforced the Roughneck’s delinquency

Predictions about boys’ futures were correct