

# Neo Marxist Theory of Crime

Neo-Marxist criminology extends traditional Marxist perspectives, addressing their deterministic and reductionist limitations. This approach, developed by Walton, Taylor, and Young, introduces the "**fully social theory of deviance**", combining Marxist structural analyses with interactionist labelling theories. It looks to explain the structural origins of crime while incorporating the meanings behind criminal acts. Central to this perspective is the belief that crime often arises from political motivations and individual choice (voluntarism), offering a broader understanding than traditional Marxism.

## **Similarities with Traditional Marxism**

Neo-Marxism keeps core Marxist principles, including the notion that capitalism underpins criminal behaviour. Both perspectives argue that capitalism creates inequality and conditions conducive to crime. They also emphasize **selective law enforcement**, where laws are crafted and applied in ways that disproportionately help the ruling class. While both theories suggest crime could decline if capitalism were abolished, Neo-Marxists accept that criminal behaviour would persist to some extent, recognizing historical examples of crime in socialist states like the USSR and Cuba. This nuanced view acknowledges that human behaviour cannot be wholly shaped by economic systems.

## **Key Differences from Traditional Marxism**

Neo-Marxists take a different approach from traditional Marxists by emphasizing that individuals actively choose to commit crimes rather than being completely controlled by society's system, like capitalism. Traditional Marxists often see people as victims of capitalism, driven to crime by poverty or inequality, but Neo-Marxists argue that individuals are not powerless. Even in tough situations, people can make choices, and crime is not just an automatic response to hardship.

They also highlight that many crimes are **politically motivated**, meaning they are acts of resistance or defiance against the system, rather than just being about money or survival. For example, vandalism during a protest or stealing from a big company might be about making a statement against unfairness, not just personal gain. This view helps explain crimes that are about expressing anger or opposition to the system, rather than just needing money.

By focusing on both **individual choices** and **political motivations**, Neo-Marxists provide a broader understanding of crime. They show that while society's structures, like capitalism, influence behaviour, people still have the ability to decide how they act. This makes their theory more flexible and able to explain diverse types of crime, such as protests or hate crimes, which may not fit into traditional Marxist ideas about crime being purely about money or class struggle.

# Fully Social Theory of Deviance

## Walton, Taylor, and Young's Fully Social Theory of Deviance (1973)

Walton, Taylor, and Young created the **fully social theory of deviance** to offer a detailed way of understanding why crimes happen and how society responds. Their theory combines ideas from **structural Marxism** (focusing on big societal factors like class and inequality) and **interactionism** (looking at individual actions and meanings). They argued that to understand crime, we need to examine six key elements. These elements help connect the "big picture" of society with the choices and experiences of individuals. Let's break these down:

### 1. Structural Origins of Crime

This looks at the **big societal factors** that might create the conditions for crime. These include:

- **Economic inequality:** Are people struggling to make ends meet? Is there a big gap between the rich and the poor?
- **Political unrest:** Are people unhappy with the government or political system?
- **Social hierarchies:** How is society structured? Are some groups more privileged or disadvantaged than others?

For example, during times of high unemployment, people may feel desperate, leading to an increase in theft or other crimes.

### 2. Immediate Causes

While structural origins provide the background, this element looks at the **specific trigger** that leads to the crime happening at that moment.

- What event or situation caused the person to act?
- Was it something like losing a job, an argument, or a sudden opportunity?

For example, someone may shoplift because they just lost their job and can't afford food that week. The **immediate cause** is their financial struggle at that moment.

### 3. The Act Itself

This focuses on the **crime and its meaning**. It's not just about what happened but **why it happened** from the offender's perspective.

- What was the person trying to achieve?
- Did they feel like they had no choice, or was it a way to make a statement?

For instance, vandalizing a corporate building might be about more than just causing damage—it could be a protest against unfair treatment by that company. This part also looks at how the individual sees their own actions.

#### 4. Immediate Social Reaction

This step looks at **how society responds** to the crime right after it happens. This includes:

- **Public reactions:** Are people outraged or scared?
- **Media coverage:** How does the news report the crime? Does it exaggerate or create fear?
- **Law enforcement actions:** How do the police or courts manage the situation?

For example, a high-profile robbery might lead to a media frenzy, making people think crime is rising, even if it's not.

#### 5. Origins of the Reaction

This digs deeper into **why society reacted the way it did**.

- Are political leaders or the media using the crime to push their own agendas?
- Are cultural norms influencing how people view the crime?

For example, during an economic crisis, a government might blame immigrants for rising crime to distract from their own failures. This shifts public anger away from those in power.

#### 6. Outcomes of the Reaction

Finally, this step examines the **long-term consequences** of how society reacted to the crime. It explores:

- **Labelling:** Does the person get labelled as a "criminal," making it harder for them to change?
- **Stereotypes:** Do certain groups (e.g., young people, ethnic minorities) get unfairly associated with crime?
- **Policy changes:** Does the reaction lead to stricter laws or shifts in public attitudes?

For instance, if the media sensationalizes youth crime, young people might be unfairly targeted by police, even when they're innocent.

#### Interconnected Framework

These six elements don't always happen in a neat order. Instead, they often **overlap and connect**. For example, understanding the act itself might also reveal something about structural origins or social reactions. By combining both **big-picture societal factors** and **individual motivations**, the fully social theory offers a complete view of why crime happens and what it means for society.

This framework is useful because it doesn't focus only on the individual or only on society—it bridges the gap, helping us understand both the causes of crime and the wider reactions to it.

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### **Case Study: Hall's "Policing the Crisis"**

Stuart Hall's "**Policing the Crisis**" provides a detailed application of the fully social theory of deviance to the moral panic surrounding "muggings" in the UK during the 1970s.

- **Structural Origins:** Hall contextualizes the phenomenon within the economic recession, societal racism, and a crisis of hegemony in the 1970s UK. These conditions created widespread poverty and division, particularly among Black communities.
- **Immediate Causes:** High unemployment among Black men, exacerbated by immigration rhetoric, functioned as a trigger. Black men were often scapegoated for economic difficulties, creating tensions within the working class.
- **The Act:** The so-called "muggings" (a term not legally recognized at the time) were framed as survival strategies, as individuals struggled to meet basic needs during the economic downturn.
- **Immediate Reaction:** Media outrage sensationalized the issue, and police targeting of Black men reinforced racial stereotypes. This cycle of arrests and moral panic fed public fear and perpetuated systemic racism.
- **Origins of Reaction:** The scapegoating of Black men served political purposes, deflecting blame from government policies and preventing unity among the working class that might threaten capitalist structures.
- **Outcomes:** This moral panic highlighted institutional racism within the police and justice system. It also started early discussions about systemic discrimination, though significant reforms did not emerge until much later, such as with the Stephen Lawrence case in the 1990s.

This case demonstrates how structural and interactionist elements converge to explain trends in criminal behaviour and societal reactions.

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### **Application to Hate Crimes**

The fully social theory also applies effectively to **hate crimes**, particularly those that rose sharply following events like 9/11:

- **Structural Origins:** Hate crimes are rooted in societal racism and the "othering" of certain groups, often exacerbated by global events like terrorist attacks.
- **Immediate Causes:** Events such as 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks fuelled Islamophobia and xenophobia, triggering a surge in hate crimes.

- **The Act:** Hate crimes encompass verbal abuse, physical violence, property damage, and other forms of aggression motivated by prejudice against race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.
  - **Immediate Reaction:** Public protests (e.g., Black Lives Matter), media coverage, and calls for systemic change highlighted societal divisions and the need for reform.
  - **Origins of Reaction:** Governments often responded defensively, framing issues like racism or police brutality as isolated incidents rather than systemic problems. This deflection served to maintain the status quo.
  - **Outcomes:** While protests and campaigns have raised awareness, meaningful change has been slow. Discussions about systemic racism and "wokeness" remain contentious, and significant structural transformations are yet to occur.
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## Criticisms

When evaluating Neo-Marxism, it's important to recognize that this theory has been criticized for some of its assumptions and limitations. Let's break down these criticisms to help you understand them in more detail.

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### 1. Romanticizing Crime

Neo-Marxism has been accused of presenting criminals as heroic figures, like Robin Hood, who break the law to fight against injustice or oppression. Sociologist Rock argues that this idea is overly simplistic and doesn't reflect reality. Most crimes don't involve stealing from the rich to help the poor, as Robin Hood is famous for. Instead, the majority of crimes affect ordinary working-class people, like thefts from homes, shops, or cars, or even violent crimes within communities. This criticism challenges the Neo-Marxist idea that crime is always a form of political resistance, showing that many crimes don't have such noble or ideological motivations.

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### 2. Limited Scope

While Neo-Marxism focuses on crimes that can be linked to political or economic conditions, such as poverty-driven theft or protest-related offenses, it struggles to explain other types of crime. For example:

**Domestic violence:** Often rooted in personal relationships, emotions, or power dynamics, rather than economic inequality or political motivations.

**Opportunistic theft:** These crimes happen because the opportunity arises, such as stealing a bike left unlocked, without any deeper systemic reason. Neo-Marxism's focus on large-scale societal structures makes it less effective at explaining crimes that arise from individual circumstances or personal motives.

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### 3. Gender Blindness

Feminists argue that Neo-Marxism fails to consider the differences between male and female experiences of crime. For example:

Men and women often commit crimes for different reasons. Men might commit crimes to show power or control, while women may commit crimes out of necessity, such as stealing to support their families.

Neo-Marxism treats crime as if it's the same for everyone, ignoring how gender plays a role in why people commit crimes and how they are treated by the justice system. Feminists describe this as gender blindness, meaning that Neo-Marxism overlooks the unique experiences of women and other gendered aspects of crime.

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### 4. Deviation from Marxism

Critics like Hirst argue that Neo-Marxism has strayed too far from the core ideas of traditional Marxism. Traditional Marxism focuses on how capitalism creates class inequality and exploitation. Neo-Marxism, however, combines these ideas with concepts from other theories, like labeling theory, which looks at how individuals are treated by society. While this combination provides a broader perspective, some argue that it dilutes the core Marxist focus on economic inequality. In other words, calling it "Marxism" might be misleading, as it no longer sticks closely to Marx's original ideas.

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### 5. Overemphasis on Political Motivations

Neo-Marxism often links crime to acts of resistance against the system, like protesting against inequality or challenging authority. However, Right Realists (another sociological perspective) argue that this is an overgeneralization. They believe most crimes are not politically motivated but are instead about opportunism and personal gain. For example:

A person might steal because they see an easy opportunity, not because they are protesting inequality.

Crimes like drug dealing or fraud are often driven by greed or self-interest rather than political beliefs. This criticism highlights that Neo-Marxism may overestimate the role of politics and ignore more basic, everyday reasons why people commit crimes.