

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND GENERAL STRAIN  
THEORY

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## Abstract

People become aware of crime within their communities, but they often do not know why it occurs, especially when the offender is a minor. In 2018, there were 728,280 juvenile arrests, and arrest rates have been continuously declining since 2006 (Puzzanchera, 2019). This is in addition to the unknown delinquent offenses that did not result in arrest. By examining risk factors and real-life cases of delinquency, this manuscript seeks to better understand what causes juvenile delinquency, or crimes committed by those under age 18, by applying the fundamentals of General Strain Theory. General Strain Theory, developed by Robert Agnew, is an extension of Robert Merton's Strain Theory. The main focus of General Strain Theory is on one's negative relationships with other individuals. General Strain Theory is the only major theory that solely focuses on negative relationships and argues that delinquency occurs as a result of these negative relationships. According to Agnew (1992), strain follows when others "(1) prevent one from achieving their positively valued goals, (2) remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with negatively valued stimuli" (p. 50). As with all criminal behavior, juvenile crime may be caused by multiple factors, but perhaps General Strain Theory can help us understand much of it.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Juvenile delinquency.....	1
Status offenses.....	1
Truancy.....	2
Running away from home.....	2
Curfew violation.....	2
Underaged drinking.....	3
Incorrigible youth.....	3
Delinquent offenses.....	3
Rates of delinquency.....	3
Importance of understanding delinquency .....	4
Theories.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Rational Choice Theory.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Social Learning Theory.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Differential Association Theory.....	6
Social Disorganization Theory.....	6
Risk factors.....	7
Individual.....	7
Peer.....	8
Family.....	8
School.....	8
Community.....	8
General Strain Theory.....	9
Prevention of positively valued goals.....	11
As a disjunction between aspirations and expectations/actual achievements.....	11
As a disjunction between expectations and actual achievements.....	12
As a disjunction between just/fair outcomes and actual outcomes.....	12
Removal of positively-valued stimuli.....	13

Presentation of noxious stimuli.....	13
Emotional reactions.....	14
Subjective/objective strain.....	15
Characteristics of strain.....	16
Seen as unjust.....	16
High in magnitude.....	17
Low levels of social control.....	18
Creates pressure/incentive to engage in criminal coping.....	18
Storylines... ..	19
Desperate need for money.....	20
Unresolved dispute.....	21
Temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions.....	22
Conclusion.....	24
References.....	25

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The purpose of this manuscript is to explore the usefulness of Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory in explaining juvenile delinquency. General Strain Theory is a major theory in criminology that provides a unique explanation for crime and delinquency, and by applying the theory, I explore some of the reasons why delinquency occurs in the youth population. To begin, I will describe juvenile delinquency in basic terms, provide background statistics, and examine several risk factors that contribute to delinquency. Subsequently, I will describe various facets of General Strain Theory, especially those that directly pertain to delinquency, in order to better explain juvenile offending.

Juvenile delinquency, used interchangeably with "delinquency," is the antisocial and criminal behavior committed by persons under the age of 18 (DeLisi, 2009). Within juvenile delinquency, there are typically two types of behaviors: status offenses and delinquent offenses. A status offense, as defined by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), is "a noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth's status as a minor" (Development Services Group, 2015a, p. 1). These offenses are considered unhealthy for the juvenile and thus include smoking tobacco and consuming alcohol. Delinquent offenses, on the other hand, are considered criminal in both the juvenile court system and adult criminal justice system (DeLisi, 2009).

The OJJDP (Development Services Group, 2015a) recognizes five primary types of status offenses. These include truancy, running away from home, curfew violation, underage use of alcohol, and general ungovernability.

Truancy refers to having routine, unexcused absences from school beyond the maximum number of absences allowed by the state. Each state has its own attendance laws that outline the age at which the child starts school, when the child is legally allowed to drop out, and lastly, the number of unexcused absences an adolescent is allowed before it is considered truancy.

According to the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, or Thrownaway Children, a runaway episode is where “[a] child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight[,] ... [a] child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to come home when expected to and stays away overnight[,] ... [or a] child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to come home and stays away two nights” (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002, p. 2). There are situational runaways, who typically return home within several days, as well as longer-term runaways, who do not return home for a long period of time, often to escape some sort of trauma (Development Services Group, 2015a, p. 3). Beharry (2012) similarly adds that “‘throwaways’ are young people who were kicked out of their homes for any reason” (p. 154).

Enforced curfews vary in each region of the nation, but there is usually some indication of the curfew, with specified hours, days, locations, and the age group which it pertains to. For instance, the District of Columbia enforces a curfew for those individuals under the age of 17, where, from September to June, they are not permitted to be on the streets from 11pm to 6am. Regardless, whether the curfews are age-based or city-based, violating curfew is considered a status offense (Development Services Group, 2015a, p. 4).

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019), approximately one in four people aged 12 or older were current binge alcohol users in 2018. Likewise, about 1.2 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 were binge drinkers in the past month (p. 11). However, the legal drinking age in the United States is 21, and a status offense by definition reflects those committed by persons under the age of 18. Therefore, underage drinking by someone who is at least 18 years old is considered a criminal offense (Development Services Group, 2015a).

The final status offense is being an ungovernable or incorrigible youth. A minor who is considered incorrigible is one whose misbehavior is so frequent or severe that legal assistance is required to try to control it. An example of such behavior would be if the juvenile routinely commits any of the above-mentioned status offenses, and in the process, endangers the well-being of other individuals (Development Services Group, 2015a).

As noted earlier, delinquent offenses, unlike status offenses, are considered criminal in both the juvenile court system and adult criminal justice system (DeLisi, 2009). These offenses may be acts of violence against other individuals, such as murder, rape, and simple or aggravated assault, or property crimes, such as theft, burglary, or arson. Delinquent offenses can also be crimes known as public order offenses, which include driving under the influence, disorderly conduct, and traffic violations (DeLisi, 2009).

Rates of juvenile delinquency have changed over the last few decades. Data taken from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) highlight several key takeaways. In 2018, the rates of juvenile arrests (2,167.1 arrests per 100,000 persons) were the lowest since

the 1980s. Arrests have continuously declined since 2006, when the rate was 6,072.8 per 100,000. Juveniles accounted for only 7 percent of arrests in 2018, with males and white youth making up the majority of these arrests (Puzzanchera, 2019). There was a total of 728,280 arrests for all offenses; 62 percent of those arrested were white, and 35 percent were black (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2019a). In 2018, there was also a 5 percent decrease in violent offenses from the previous report year, which marked a new low in 2018. As the OJJDP notes, juvenile arrests for property offenses have also steadily decreased each year since the 1990s (Puzzanchera, 2019). The arrest rate of black youth for property crimes reached a peak of 4,421.2 per 100,000 in 1994 and decreased to a new low of 999.5 arrests in 2018. In 1991, white youth arrests peaked at 2,357.7 per 100,000, and declined to 287.4 in 2018 (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2019b). Similarly, the violent crime arrest rate declined for all racial groups between 2006 and 2018 (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2019b). Arrests of black youth for violent crimes peaked in 1994 (1,546.8 per 100,000), and decreased to 420.6 per 100,000 in 2018. White youth accounted for 171.2 per 100,000 arrests in 2006 and the rate declined to 86.4 arrests in 2018 (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2019c).

DeLisi (2009) maintains that understanding juvenile delinquency is important for society. One reason is that children and adolescents commit a substantial amount of delinquent offenses which consequently result in either violent or property victimization. Another reason for its importance is that it gives an indication of the health and prosperity of society. In other words, if an area experiences an escalated level of delinquency, it indicates a more problematic social issue and suggests that adults do not play an active role in managing their youths' behavior. A third crucial factor is that

juvenile delinquency can have different interpretations. For instance, some may view delinquency as a regular aspect of childhood or adolescence and expect that these individuals will eventually mature and grow out of it. For others, delinquency can be seen as a pathway to additional criminal and antisocial behavior, which may ultimately lead to a criminal lifestyle.

There are several theories in criminology that have tried to explain the causes of juvenile delinquency. These include those in classical, psychological, and sociological traditions, specifically including Rational Choice Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Social Disorganization Theory (DeLisi, 2009).

According to DeLisi (2009), some of the earliest theories of juvenile delinquency were the classical theories, specifically Cesare Beccaria's Rational Choice Theory. This theory holds that people have their own free will to make thoughtful, rational decisions. Rational choice theory thus proposes that juvenile delinquents weigh the benefits and consequences before acting out. Delinquency, therefore, represents a well-thought-out decision, since offenders create a plan of where the act will take place, who will be affected, and how the act will be carried out.

Psychological theories, on the other hand, "explain juvenile delinquency with individual-level constructs that exist within all people and interact with the social world" (DeLisi, 2009, p. 528). One of the most famous psychological theories is Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. In this theory, Bandura hypothesized that children and youth learn behaviors through imitation. In his well-known and controversial experiment, a group of children were exposed to a video of a person repeatedly hitting an inflatable toy. Compared to those children in a control group who

were not exposed to the program, the exposed children started exhibiting violent tendencies towards the inflatable toy themselves. Through social learning, children learn that aggression can sometimes be acceptable and that it can achieve the desired outcome.

Differential Association Theory, developed by Edward Sutherland (1947), is one of the most popular theories of juvenile delinquency. Sutherland asserted that delinquent behavior is learned and is not a trait that someone is born with. Therefore, it is learned through the interaction with others, where the individual learns and utilizes new behaviors from their peers in small, face-to-face groups. The most important principle from this theory, however, is that a juvenile becomes delinquent when there are more positive definitions, or attitudes, to the violation of the law than not. For instance, if a child's parents condone physical aggression, then the child will come to believe that it is acceptable.

Similarly, Social Disorganization Theory, developed by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942), attempts to explain delinquency, not by focusing on the individual, but on where the individual lives. Shaw and McKay studied areas of certain neighborhoods in Chicago that created conditions that were favorable to delinquency. They mapped out areas of the city using zones I through V. Zones I and II were towards the center of the city, which was considered the downtown business district. They noted that the first two zones were run-down, and rates of delinquency in these areas remained relatively stable regardless of race or ethnicity of its residents. Thus, they found that the first two zones had the highest rates of delinquency, and that rates of delinquency declined as they moved further away from the city center. Shaw and McKay explained that the first two

zones had the highest levels of social disorganization, marked by poverty, deteriorating infrastructure, high rates of unemployment, and exposure to criminal activity.

Why have delinquency rates been higher for some years, but lower for others?

Relatedly, who is more likely to offend? To answer this question, the OJJDP

(Development Services Group, 2015b) has outlined several risk factors that are linked to delinquency. Risk factors are “personal traits, characteristics of the environment, or conditions in the family, school, or community that are linked to youths’ likelihood of engaging in delinquency and other problem behaviors (Murray and Farrington, 2010)”

(Development Services Group, 2015b). The OJJDP (2015b) also states two categories of risk factors: static risk factors and dynamic risk factors. Static risk factors are historical characteristics that cannot be changed, such as a history of violent behavior or parental involvement in crime. Dynamic risk factors, on the other hand, “are characteristics that can change over time, because of treatment or the normal development process (Vincent, Guy, & Grisso, 2012)” (Development Services Group, 2015b). Given how impressionable young people are, risk factors play a crucial role in their development.

The younger a child is when exposed to these factors and the longer they are exposed, the greater their chances of engaging in delinquency (Development Services Group, 2015b).

These risk factors have been organized into five categories. These include those found at individual, peer, family, school, and community levels (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 2).

Individual risk factors are “any characteristics directly related to or within a specific person that affect the likelihood of that individual engaging in violent and delinquent behavior” (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 4). There are several

indicators for each risk factor. For example, indicators of antisocial behavior can be exhibited through reported gang involvement, juvenile arrests for vandalism or for drugs or alcohol, and attempted suicide (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 4).

Peer-related risk factors are those that are directly linked to other individuals, which can include delinquent friends, gang membership, and the quality of peer relationships (Wong, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2010). Having peers who have had prior arrests, experiencing rejection by prosocial peers, and having violent friends may all present a risk (Development Services Group, 2015b).

Family-level risk factors are related to the overall structure of the family, and according to Murray and Farrington (2010), these include low attachment to parents, negative parenting styles, family conflict, and having parents with a criminal history or a substance abuse issue. Indications of these risk factors can include children living outside their families, lack of parental involvement, incarcerated parents, and children born with fetal-alcohol syndrome (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 5-6).

School risk factors relate to school achievement, attachment, and commitment to school (Wong, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2010). For instance, being suspended or expelled from school, having low motivation, and experiencing low parental expectations are related to having a negative attitude about school. Similarly, high levels of distrust between teachers and students, the negative attitudes of teachers, and higher levels of violence within the school setting are all indicators of inadequate school climate, a major risk factor for impressionable youth (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 8).

Lastly, community risk factors are those that relate to where one lives. As demonstrated by Shaw and McKay (1942), the areas that have more social

disorganization, such as heavily-vandalized areas or those affected by poverty, have greater levels of crime. Therefore, youth that are continuously exposed to this environment are more likely to mimic the behaviors that they are exposed to. Risk factors include community instability, economic poverty, and the availability of firearms, drugs, and alcohol. Indicators of poverty include lack of access to health insurance, unemployment, and receipt of government welfare checks (Development Services Group, 2015b, p. 9).

In this paper, I explore the usefulness of General Strain Theory to explain juvenile delinquency. The reason General Strain Theory was chosen for study is because it is a major theory in criminology that has a unique explanation for why youth engage in delinquent behavior. The theory argues that several strains, or causes of stress, promote negative emotions, particularly anger, that ultimately lead to criminal behavior if the individual does not have the proper coping abilities to manage stress in a nondelinquent way. More specifically, Agnew (1992) argues that adolescents are pressured into delinquency by the negative emotions that come from negative relationships (p. 49). Agnew also writes that unlike other social theories, such as Merton's strain theory, General Strain Theory views delinquency as a result of pressure, and not of desire (p. 50).

General Strain Theory is an extension of Robert Merton's Strain Theory. In contrast to Agnew's General Strain Theory, Merton's theory primarily focuses on one type of negative relationship, which is the relationship that prevents the individual from achieving their positively-valued goals. More specifically, Merton's focus was mainly on goal blockage that was only applicable to the lower class who wanted the wealth of the middle class (Merton, 1938). Merton's theory highlights that people will resort to crime

because they feel that they have no other options, and specifically references the lower classes. To put this into perspective, many individuals desire the “American Dream,” where people enjoy wealth and success. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to reach this goal by lawful means, which ultimately causes strain and crime.

Despite being the foundation for Agnew’s strain theory, Merton’s original theory has several drawbacks. To start, it does not provide any explanation for the delinquency of the middle class (Agnew, 1992, p. 51). Simply because individuals of the middle class have more wealth does not mean that crime and delinquency are not present. Secondly, Merton’s theory does not mention goals other than achieving wealth, status, and success (p. 51). Naturally, wealth is not equally important to every individual, so it does not address other goals that lower-class individuals may desire more. Lastly, it does not address barriers besides social class that explain why some individuals do not reach their goals, and it also does not explain why some individuals turn to delinquency, while others do not (p. 51).

In General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), the primary focus is on negative relationships with others, where the individual feels that they are not treated as they should be. General Strain Theory is the only major theory to overtly focus on negative relationships and to argue that adolescents are pressured into delinquency as a result of these negative relationships. When adolescents feel that they are being treated unjustly, they are more vulnerable, and thus they may feel the need to act out. Agnew (1992) identifies three major types of strain, or negative relationships with others. Strain follows when others “(1) prevent one from achieving their positively valued goals, (2) remove or

threaten to remove positively valued stimuli that one possesses, or (3) present or threaten to present one with negatively valued stimuli” (p. 50).

Within the three types of strain are several disjunctions. The first strain, the prevention of achieving positively-valued goals, has three categories: strain as a disjunction between “(1) aspirations and expectations/actual achievements, (2) expectations and actual achievements, and (3) just/fair outcomes and actual outcomes” (Agnew, 1992, p. 56). These are significant because they help to further explain the first type of strain.

The first category of strain, a disjunction between aspirations and expectations, has received more attention than the other strains, and Agnew argues that this strain is the primary reason why delinquency occurs. The classic strain theories, such as Merton’s, say that society encourages individuals to achieve monetary wealth and higher social status. Given that this goal cannot be achieved by everyone, adolescent strain is measured by the disjunctions between aspirations, or desired goals, and expected goals (Agnew, 1992, p. 51).

Researchers have given other explanations that better explain strain and its sources. According to Agnew (1992), “the most popular revision argues that there is a youth subculture that emphasizes a variety of immediate goals” (p. 51). Youth subculture includes different behaviors, styles, and outside interests. Furthermore, there are several other factors that can lead to an individual achieving their goals, such as intelligence, physical attractiveness, personality, and athletic ability (p. 51). However, not every individual feels that they possess these traits or skills that might allow them to reach their

goals. This version of strain theory continues to argue that strain is indirectly caused by the failure to achieve the goals through these factors from the youth subculture.

In the second category, the disjunction between expected and actual achievements, Agnew (1992) suggests that these expectations stem from past experiences or from comparisons between the individual and other similar people (p. 52). Criminological literature argues that “the failure to achieve such expectations may lead to emotions such as anger, resentment, rage, dissatisfaction, disappointment, and unhappiness” (p. 52). Failure to reach these expectations may be one reason why some individuals may engage in deviance or delinquency and may try to shorten the gap between expectations and achievements.

Regarding the final category, the disjunction between just/fair outcomes and actual outcomes, one thought is that individuals do not necessarily have an idea of a specific outcome, but instead, they have an idea that there are unwritten rules of distributive justice. In other words, these are rules that specify how resources should be distributed, and they expect them to be followed. The most popular rule is the equity rule, where outcomes involve a wide range of positive and negative consequences, while inputs involve the positive and negative contributions (p. 53). To put this into perspective, the equity rule refers to the equivalence of the input and output of the situation. For instance, if the result of a situation is similar to the result of someone else in a similar situation, then that individual will view the outcome as fair. The relationship between inequity and delinquency has been studied, and this inequity can lead to delinquency for a number of reasons. First, the individual may be involved in delinquency, such as theft, because they want to increase their chance of a fair outcome.

Secondly, they may want to lower their inputs, such as by skipping school or leaving early. Similarly, they may want to lower the outcomes of others, by committing assault or theft, for instance, as well as increasing the inputs of others, which can be characterized by engaging in difficult behavior (Agnew, 1992, p. 54).

Likewise, Agnew (1992) argued that the strain involving the removal of positively valued stimuli must be considered (p. 57). Every individual experiences stress or a stressful event at some point in time, and this particular strain involves the loss of something that was once important to the individual. Some examples include the death of a close family member or the loss of a supportive marriage. Divorce can be particularly stressful to a child because it can cause distress due to the lack of togetherness, especially if the divorce was unexpected. Additionally, moving to another city and having to restart a part of the child's life is another major stimulus for many reasons, including the stress of being unfamiliar with the new area, being worried about making new friends, or being scared to have to leave the life they had known for a long time. Therefore, the actual loss of the positively valued stimulus may lead to delinquency, as the individual tries to prevent the strain from occurring, like by trying to convince their parents to keep their marriage. The individual may also try to replace the loss of positively valued stimuli with another, or plot revenge against the one responsible for the loss (p. 57-58). In their efforts to try to manage the loss of what was once important to them, the individual may turn to delinquency as a way out.

The third major type of strain is the presentation of noxious, or negative, stimuli (Agnew, 1992, p. 58). Research indicates that this strain may lead to aggression and other negative emotions in particular conditions. Noxious stimuli may lead to delinquency as

long as the juvenile tries to “(1) escape from or avoid the negative stimuli,” such as keeping distance between another person to protect personal space, (2) “terminate or alleviate the negative stimuli,” such as walking away from a confrontational situation, (3) “seek revenge against the source of the negative stimuli or related targets,” like getting someone fired, “and/or (4) manage the resultant negative affect by taking illicit drugs” (Agnew, 1992, p. 58).

Agnew (1992) recognized that there is a great amount of overlap between the three types of strain, despite them being independent. In one example, Agnew writes that, “the insults of a teacher may be experienced as adverse because they (1) interfere with the adolescent’s aspirations for academic success, (2) result in the violation of a distributive justice rule such as equity, and (3) are conditioned stimuli and so are noxious in and of themselves” (p. 59).

In Agnew’s General Strain Theory, emotional reactions to strain involve negative emotions, including fear, disappointment, and depression. However, anger is the most important emotion because it affects the individual in ways that encourage crime, such as by intensifying the effect of the stimulus. Anger also may create an urge for the individual to take corrective measures against their source of strain, and delinquency is one response (Agnew, 1992, p. 60). These emotions can generate pressure for delinquency as a way to alleviate these emotions and to try to get rid of the negative stimuli (Agnew and White, 1992).

This theory also suggests when strain is most likely to progress into delinquency. First, it will be when constraints to nondelinquent coping are high and the constraints to delinquent coping are low, such as having more opportunity to engage in delinquent

behavior. The second constraint is when the adolescent has a disposition for delinquent coping, such as a family history of delinquency (Agnew and White, 1992).

The actual coping effectiveness of delinquency was explored by Brezina (1996), who examined the ways that adolescents manage strain and rely on delinquency to reduce the negative emotions they feel from it. Using National Youth and Transition Survey data, two hypotheses were tested. The first was that “strain generates negative affect, including feelings of anger, resentment, fear, and despair” and the second was that “delinquent behaviors reduce the effects of strain on negative affect” (p. 45). Brezina concluded that the results of the analyses tentatively supported both hypotheses. He noted that “strain is positively associated with the experience of several negative emotions, and delinquency appears to reduce the impact of strain on these emotions” (p. 52). The results also show that these effects are “theoretically consistent” with General Strain Theory.

To better understand General Strain Theory, it is also important to recognize objective and subjective strain. Objective strain signifies the conditions that are disliked by most members of a particular group. Most of the events that are characterized as objective strain are events that are disliked by most people, regardless of group, which include homelessness, assault, abandonment, and neglect. For example, Edmund Kemper, a serial killer from the 1960s, constantly craved his mother’s attention, despite her cruel behavior towards him. She often locked him in the basement, verbally berated him, and was always disappointed in him for not living up to her own standards. As early as 10 years of age, he began to kill family pets and had thoughts about killing family members. At age 15, he murdered his paternal grandparents, and after spending several years in a mental hospital, he began killing young female hitchhikers (Leibman, 1989).

Subjective strain, on the other hand, refers to events that are disliked by others who have experienced or are currently experiencing them, and this is related to the emotional response of the individual. Subjective strain differs from objective strain because it focuses on strain that is specific to the individual, rather than as a collective group. For instance, failing an exam may not have as much significance to someone who does not care about their grades, but it would deeply affect a very grade-oriented student.

Agnew (2001) offers a range of variables that influence the subjective evaluation of an event by different individuals, including irritability, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social supports. This is important for understanding how one event might be stressful for one person, but not for another. It should also be noted that two individuals may interpret the event the same way but have different responses. For instance, two people may dislike a situation the same way, but one person's reaction might be more intense than that of the other person. Failing an exam or a class might not affect a student who does not care as much as an exceptional student, but regardless, both students would at least be a little upset about failing.

Several of these strain characteristics are more likely to lead to crime than others. Agnew (2001) states that crime will likely result when the strain (1) is seen as unjust, such as being treated unfairly by teachers; (2) is high in magnitude, such as suffering a serious physical injury; (3) is associated with low social control, such as parental rejection; and (4) creates some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping, including abuse (p. 326).

According to Agnew, those types of strains that are seen as unjust are the ones that would more likely lead to crime, mainly because (as was discussed earlier) they tend

to produce emotions such as anger, an emotion largely associated with crime (Agnew, 2001, p. 327). As a result of anger, regular cognitive processes are disturbed and hinder noncriminal coping. For instance, when someone is angry, they may not see the situation for what it is, and they may overreact instead of trying to look for a more rational solution. Agnew also mentions that anger reduces the regard for crime. Instead of feeling guilty for partaking in an illicit activity, the individual may feel that the negative event they experienced outweighs doing the crime itself. For example, two juveniles in 1998 opened fire at their middle school because they were bullied. The shooters, Andrew Golden, age 11, and Mitchell Johnson, age 13, were responsible for the death of five people and injury of 11 students. Johnson had been rejected by a girl and was teased for his weight. Golden had also been rejected by a girl and felt that the shooting was justified because of this (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Additionally, anger may create a sense of power, making the individual feel that they had a moment where they were in control of the outcome of a situation (Agnew, 2001).

If the strain is also seen as high in magnitude, it means that there is a higher probability that the individual will engage in delinquent behavior. An example would be if a person received a highly offensive verbal insult and they wanted to retaliate. This strain affects how one copes in a regular, noncriminal manner, how the individual feels about the action, such as whether or not they feel guilty about doing it, and the disposition to be involved in criminal coping. Severe strain to an individual reduces their ability to cope, either emotionally and behaviorally. If an event is traumatic or stressful, the victim may become depressed, which inhibits their ability to cope with such a condition. Likewise, severe strain may lead to anger, so the individual feels that the

criminal behavior is justified, since they are a victim of such distress (Agnew, 2001, p. 332).

The level of social control is another factor that can lead strain to progress into crime. Certain events that relate to low social control include poor parenting, parental rejection, or homelessness. With this factor, the cost of crime is reduced because the individual feels that once again, their actions can be justified. Juveniles subject to low social control typically do not have the proper social support and resources, so they turn to crime as a way to cope.

Consider, for example, the case of Aileen Wuornos, who is considered the one of first American female serial killers. Wuornos was born into a destructive life, where she was abandoned by both of her biological parents and was later adopted by her grandparents, who abused her. Since she had no social support, Wuornos turned to drugs, alcohol, and sex during adolescence. She lived in fear of her grandfather, who abused her the most, and her older siblings did not protect her. She began prostitution at a very young age and was working on the highways of Florida by age 20 (Smith, 2005).

On the other hand, some strains stem from high social control, such as strict parenting, or, for working adults, long work hours that are a part of one's job. Strain that is high in social control does not usually lead to crime because the high social control increases the cost of crime and can also increase the ability to cope in noncriminal ways (Agnew, 2001, p. 335).

The last factor that increases the probability that strain will lead to crime is when the strain creates pressure to engage in criminal coping. Certain individuals are exposed to this factor more than others, like if they are bullied, abused, or have seen bullying take

place around them. If criminal coping is a regular part of an individual's life, they are more vulnerable to also acting the same way, since it has been modeled to them on multiple occasions (Agnew, 2001, p. 337). Albert De Salvo was a criminal during the 1960s, who was responsible for the death of 13 women. De Salvo was raised in poverty by a very abusive father, who introduced him to a criminal lifestyle at a very young age. By the time he was 12 years old, he already had a criminal record. (Leibman, 1989).

Bullying can have a strong effect on one's behavior, as demonstrated in the case of Eric Smith. In 1993, 13-year-old Eric Smith lured 4-year-old Derrick Robie into the woods and violently murdered him in Savona, Steuben County, New York (Nordheimer, 1994). In an interview, the assailant said that the motive for the murder was the relentless bullying inflicted by his father, older sister, and peers (Freile, 2014). In the same interview, Smith said that Robie did not deserve to be a victim of his aggression. Nobody suspected him to have such rage, and because of the constant bullying, no one checked on him (Nordheimer, 1994). Smith was later convicted and sentenced to nine years to life in prison (Freile, 2014).

Finally, in a 2006 publication, Agnew acknowledges an often-disregarded cause of crime: storylines. Storylines are the events and conditions that lead up to the crime, which usually tell the story of why the individual engaged in the crime to begin with. The author recognizes that often times, when criminologists are asked why some individuals engage in crime, they usually reflect on background factors, such as low self-control, poor parental supervision, and association with delinquent peers (Agnew, 2006, p. 119). Researchers also point to situational factors, such as the absence of capable guardians and provocation by others, in an attempt to explain crime. According to the author, "these

factors influence the likelihood that predisposed offenders will commit criminal acts in particular situations” (Agnew, 2006, p. 119). However, more often than not, a criminal will not attribute their background factors to their criminal activity but will instead focus on the events that led them to carry out the crime (Agnew, 2006, p. 120).

Agnew (2006) identifies several storylines that are conducive to crime and describes the events that begin each storyline. The author describes five storylines: “a desperate need for money,” “an unresolved dispute,” “a brief, but a close involvement with criminal others,” “a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions,” and “a brief, but tempting opportunity for crime.” Three of these—“a desperate need for money,” “an unresolved dispute,” and “a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions”—are relevant to applying General Strain Theory to delinquency, and thus, will be explained in more detail. For each of these storylines, General Strain Theory can be applied to suggest why they may increase the probability of committing crime (p. 127).

The first relevant storyline is “a desperate need for money” (Agnew, 2006, p. 127). Unsurprisingly, money is often a great motivator for committing crime, especially if the individual is dealing with financial difficulty. Agnew states that there is a range of events that create this storyline, with the most common including unexpected expenses and the temporary loss of financial support. This storyline is a type of goal-blockage, which is one of the strains highlighted in General Strain Theory. Agnew (1992) states that strain follows when a person is prevented from achieving their positively valued goals. Individuals, including juveniles, who are under financial pressure may turn to illegal and illegitimate ways of earning income in order to make ends meet (Agnew,

2006). Individuals who are also experiencing reduced levels of control may find themselves desperate for money. As mentioned earlier, low social control levels can lead strain to progress into crime (Agnew, 2001). With reduced control, the offender feels that their actions are acceptable if they can justify them. In this storyline, an inability to provide for their family, for example, can be a justifiable reason to attain the money illegitimately. While the individual's self-control is reduced, they may be more willing to act more impulsively out of desperation (Agnew, 2006, p. 128).

The next useful storyline is "an unresolved dispute." According to Agnew (2006), there are four key elements that make up this storyline: "*Someone does or says something that the individual does not like*, something that challenges a core identity or status, threatens core values, interferes or threatens to interfere with valued activities, removes or threatens to remove valued possessions, and/or poses a risk to physical well-being" (italics in original) (p. 129). As a result of these events, the individual may see crime as the best response. Similarly, these elements could provoke negative emotions, especially anger, which is a crucial emotion in General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2006, p. 129).

Unresolved disputes can consist of abusive behavior, status threats, and romantic disputes. These are all types of strain, given that they produce negative emotions, and consequently, they may lead the individual to crime. For instance, in 1997, a 14-year-old boy killed three classmates and injured five students at a prayer meeting before school. The assailant, Michael Carneal, was regularly bullied. He also experienced social rejection, and his first victim was a girl with whom he was infatuated, but who did not reciprocate these feelings (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

The final helpful storyline is “a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions.” According to Agnew (2006), the individual *initiates or is subject to a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions*. This break causes the individual to *believe that the costs of crime are low*” (italics in original) (Agnew, 2006, p. 134). There are three key reasons that cause this break: conventional others temporarily leave the individual or force the individual to leave, such as ending a romantic relationship; an individual temporarily leaves the conventional others and/or institutions, such as skipping school; and conventional others or institutions temporarily lose their ability to function in a normal manner, like sick parents leaving their child unattended. This storyline can be applied to the strain of “loss of positively valued stimuli” as well as “present or threaten to present negatively valued stimuli” (Agnew, 1992).

Agnew suggests that the break could reduce the individual’s stake in conformity, or how much the person has to lose, and increase strain (Agnew, 2006, p. 135). With a higher stake in conformity, a person has more at risk, so they are less likely to engage in crime. A reduced stake in conformity, however, can lead to strain, especially if the individual has lost something important to them, including reduced ties with others, such as a close friend or parent. For instance, the case of Cyntoia Brown made headlines back in 2006, when she was sentenced to life in prison after being convicted of first-degree murder and aggravated robbery. Brown had run away from home and had very few resources to turn to. She was forced into prostitution by a man known as “Cut Throat,” who sexually abused her. In 2004, she shot and killed Johnny Allen, who had picked her up for prostitution. Brown claimed the shooting was in self-defense, since she thought that Allen was pulling out a gun. This case received attention because despite being an

underage girl who had been abused by older, more powerful men, she had to suffer the harsh legal consequences (Gajanan, 2020).

In this thesis, I have explored the usefulness of General Strain Theory for understanding the causes of juvenile delinquency. General Strain Theory is a major criminological theory that suggests that delinquency is caused by strain. Agnew (1992) outlines three major types of strain: the prevention of achieving a positively valued goal, the removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negatively valued stimuli. Agnew (2001) especially notes that strains increase the likelihood of crime, especially if the strain is seen as unjust, is high in magnitude, is associated with low social control, and creates some pressure or incentive to engage in criminal coping. In addition, Agnew (2006) addresses the subject of storylines, which are events and conditions that lead up to a crime. Although General Strain Theory cannot explain all the causes of juvenile delinquency in its entirety—for instance, General Strain Theory may not be helpful for explaining crimes committed by individuals due to mental illnesses—it is a well-known theory that offers a useful explanation of crime and delinquency.

Adolescence is a difficult time for many individuals. Along with hormonal changes, peer group and social environments can change as well. The reaction to these changes can lead to strain, which, for some individuals, leads to delinquent behavior. Agnew (1992) acknowledges that negative reactions to strain are formed by negative emotions, such as fear, disappointment, and most importantly, anger. When individuals, especially juveniles, do not know how to or feel that they cannot cope with strain in a noncriminal manner, crime might be seen as an appropriate response. Because strain

reflects the difficulties of adolescence, I conclude that General Strain Theory may be effective in helping to understand why juveniles commit crime.

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