Crime as a Social Problem
Media, Opinion, Fallacies, & Extent

Outline
- Overview
  - Criminology
  - Sociology
  - Social vs Sociological Problems
    - Aside: Five levels of abstraction
- Media Issues
  - Over-dramatization
  - Questionable Emphases
- Mythology of Crime
  - Aspects (4)
  - Consequences

Social vs. Sociological Problems
- Social Problems
  - Worries people (even if not real)
  - Has negative social impacts (even if misunderstood)
  - Might be “fixable” (but won’t be fixed if...)
- Sociological Problems – may overlap, but
  - Can study/analyze
  - Can conceptualize/abstract
  - Has interpersonal/institutional component
    - Not simply a “random senseless” murder, e.g.
    - Has a history, a moral background & trajectory
  - Requires investigating contexts of cases,
    - Not just rates of aggregate counts

Problematizing @ 5 Levels
- Empirical
  - What do we know?
- Methodological
  - How do we know it?
- Theoretical
  - What explains what we know?
- Epistemological
  - What kinds of explanations do we want?
- Ontological
  - What kind of knowledge do we want / is possible?

Overview
- Criminology
  - Study of the definition, commission, identification, and reactions to violations of legal proscriptions and prescriptions, and esp. of variations & patterns in them
    - Those four (distinct) in that order
    - Pro vs Pre
    - Variations & Patterns
- Sociology
  - Scientific study of social life, inc.
    - Actors and agencies (individuals, orgs, etc.)
    - Interactions, roles, & structures
    - Processes, systems, and institutions
    - Criminology is all of those

Me...
- Empirically
  - Conflict management between strangers
- Methodologically
  - Multiple/variable
- Theoretically
  - Social Geometry
  - Epistemologically
  - Pure Sociology
  - Ontologically
  - Scientific
Crime...

(note that order is reversed)

- Ontologically
  - Empirical matter, esp. behavior – set aside values
- Epistemologically
  - Relatively scientific
- Methodologically
  - Heavily quantitative
- Theoretically
  - Rich history of approaches, but much to critique
- Empirically
  - What do we know? ... Eh....

Overdramatization

- Crime Waves that Weren’t
  - 1919 – crime stories up, but not crime
  - 1976 – few crimes against elderly, lots of stories
  - 1993–96 – OJ stories, but homicide down 20%
- Crimes that Weren’t
  - Halloween candy in 1970s – 2 stories, neither fit
  - Missing children – most = runaways
  - Serial killers @20% of homicides (NYT) – seriously?
- Crimes Making the News
  - Most common TV topic – tied w sports, behind ads
  - Emphasis on violent crimes (if it bleeds, it leads)

Special (Questionable) Emphases

- Who Commits
  - Minorities & Youth
    - overrepresented in stories, not crimes
  - Virtuous Victims
- What Committed
  - Emphasis on salacious & “random” (murder), rather than private and routine (white-collar)
- How Presented
  - Selective interviewees
  - Value-laden language
  - Misleading data (e.g. population increased, too)
  - Lacking social/sociological context

Myths: Sources

1. “Drugs cause crime”
   - Bah
2. “There is no relationship between guns & violence”
   - 68% of murders with guns (racial variation

Myths: Rates & Impacts

1. “Crime is increasing”
   - Rate vs. volume
   - Decreasing, but for juveniles
2. “Most crime is violent”
   - Most is property (murder = 0.1%)
   - but violent gets attention & has > consequences?
3. “Crime is bad for everyone”
   - healthy for society (Durkheim)
   - good for dominators (Marx)

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Fuzzy Variations

- Two ideas get significant attention
  - From the public, in the media, and even in academia
- Seriousness of crime
  - Reflect values & affect reactions
  - Relatively consistent across race/gender/etc.
  - E.g. violent crimes worse than property
  - But seriousness varies case to case
  - Status of perpetrator
  - Normative status of the victim (cross-dresser)
  - Rape of strangers vs. intimates
- Punitiveness of reactions
  - Less consistent (e.g. across religion, race)
  - Death penalty more complex – see p. 42
- Neither is case-specific
  - Vague/general explanations problematic
Myths: Perpetrators

1. “Criminals are typically minorities & youth”
2. “Women are becoming “as bad as” men”
3. “Most criminals are hardcore criminals”
   - Not a “core”?
   - Most is situational?
4. “Most offenders are strangers to the victim”
   - Crime typically committed by/against intimates
5. “Crime occurs mainly in the lower classes”
   - Upper, organizational, government

Myths: Reactions

1. “Most crimes are solved and offenders punished”
   - Murder most cleared but only 667%
   - MVT = 14%
2. “Most criminals who go to trial ‘get off’”
   - Most don’t go to trial; but 60% of felonies convicted
3. “The way to remedy crime is to ‘get tough’”
   - Faulty premise (not rising), no proof (not decreasing),
     not practical (expensive, inappropriate)
4. “Nothing can be done to reduce crime”
   - Consistency
   - What is crime – and what’s a reduction?

Consequences of Mythology

- For Society
  - Public fear/concern/panic
  - Stereotyping & Discrimination
    - Not just racial/ethnic – age (etc) too!
- For Crime
  - Public ignorance
    - Inc media, legal agents, policymakers
    - Obscuring underlying forces
    - And local (case-specific) conditions!
    - Diversion from actual problems
      - Inc white-collar crime
      - Harder on others (inc “drugs”)
    - (Mis)Allocation of Resources [not in text]
      - Homeland Security
      - Drug War