

# Crime and Deviance



**Criminality in society and crime statistics are both products of social inequalities, albeit in different ways. Discuss.**

Your first task in this essay is to explain why the question has made a distinction between 'criminality in society' and 'crime statistics'. Sociologists never take statistics at face value. All such figures are the end product of a long social process and that process will be encoded within them. Official crime statistics are widely seen as amongst the least reliable of officially published figures on social issues. The section on 'Crime and crime statistics' (from page 957) goes on to detail many of the processes through which levels of recorded crime may differ dramatically from levels of criminal activity. This material will form the core of your initial discussion to show why official crime figures need to be treated with caution.

You will also need to explore the ways in which crime statistics may include systematic bias as a result of social inequalities. As labelling theory demonstrates (pp. 945-8), young working-class men are likely to be overrepresented in the figures. This is particularly true for young black men (see Chapter 15 for a useful discussion). Women are also treated in a highly gendered way in the criminal justice system. The 'chivalry' thesis suggests that female offenders are treated more leniently than males. However, feminist theorists have found that women are treated on the basis of ideas about the 'proper' behaviour for women and are then punished for deviance from the norms of femininity (pp. 960-5). White-collar crime and corporate crime are both under-recorded and certainly do not fit the popular image of crime as a working-class phenomenon, in spite of corporate crime's often severe consequences and harm for society, particularly vulnerable groups (pp. 967-70). Returning to the original question and summarizing the argument so far, official crime figures represent the endpoint of a long chain of social practices that encode the social inequalities of class, gender and race within them.

You now need to move on and ask whether it is possible to talk meaningfully about actual crime at all. A recently developed alternative is the use of victim surveys such as the British Crime Survey (p. 959). Left Realists argue that to ignore crime is to ignore a very real problem for working-class communities as much criminality is against the working class. Hence, it is important to analyse actual crime sociologically (pp. 950-1).

Functionalists accepted the statistical evidence that crime was primarily a problem of the working classes and saw its cause in a lack of opportunity for young men in poor communities (pp. 941-5). More recent theorists have also seen criminality as part of a crisis of masculinity (p. 963), whilst crimes against women and homosexuals also relate to broad patterns of inequality in society (pp. 963-5). Members of ethnic minority groups are likely to be victims of crime, although they are often presented as perpetrators. Both white-collar and corporate crime can be considered as examples of middle-class opportunity.

You will need to draw the two parts of the question together in your conclusion. Crime figures are notoriously difficult to use and are the outcome of practices within the criminal justice system, which treat people differently according to structural factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and age. Crime itself is also a social phenomenon as patterns of criminality are, arguably, also a product of social inequality.