
THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL CHANGE ON CRIME RATES: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF ANOMIE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution and ongoing relevance of Anomie Theory, first introduced by Émile Durkheim to explain how rapid social change weakens societal norms, leading to disconnection and deviance. Building on this, Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory reinterprets anomie through the lens of structural inequality, arguing that when individuals lack equal access to legitimate means of achieving societal goals, they may adopt deviant paths. Further, Jón Gunnar Bernburg's Institutional-Anomie Theory examines how capitalist societies prioritise economic success over institutional stability, weakening the regulatory roles of family, education, and religion, and thereby increasing crime. The paper analyses how economic and institutional disruptions shape criminal behaviour and highlights the continued relevance of these theories in a globalised world marked by inequality and social fragmentation. It also addresses key critiques, including limited attention to white-collar crime, individual agency, and identity. Ultimately, it presents anomie-based theories as essential to understanding crime as a structural issue, not merely a matter of personal morality.

Keywords: Anomie Theory, Strain Theory, Structural Inequality, Sociological Criminology, Crime and Social Change, Institutional Failure, Legal Theory and Crime

INTRODUCTION:

Anomie theory, developed by Emile Durkheim in the late 19th century, is one of the most influential frameworks in the field of sociology and criminology, offering a deep understanding of how societal change impacts criminal behaviour. The term "anomie," derived from the Greek word meaning "without law," refers to a state of normlessness or a breakdown in the societal norms and values that typically guide individual behaviour. In an anomic society, people experience a sense of disconnection, as the established social rules and expectations no longer serve as a cohesive force. Individuals in such societies find themselves in a state of confusion, unable to determine how to behave in a socially acceptable manner because the usual norms are either unclear or absent.

Durkheim's pioneering work on anomie was grounded in his broader study of social cohesion and the factors that influence social order. He was particularly interested in understanding how changes in society, whether economic, political, or cultural, could disrupt the balance between societal norms and individual behaviour. Durkheim believed that rapid social or economic transformation — such as industrialisation, urbanisation, or economic crises — could lead to a breakdown of the social fabric, creating a gap between societal goals and the means available to achieve them. This gap, he argued, creates an environment ripe for deviance, as individuals may turn to behaviour outside the bounds of traditional norms to fulfil their desires, often leading to criminal activities.

Durkheim's concept of anomie was revolutionary for its time, as it provided a sociological explanation for crime that was not rooted solely in individual pathology or moral failings. Instead, Durkheim suggested that societal conditions could significantly influence criminal behaviour. In particular, he noted that anomie often arises in societies experiencing rapid change or in those undergoing significant social disruption. The classic example Durkheim used to illustrate the impact of anomie was suicide rates, where he observed higher suicide rates in periods of societal upheaval, driven by individuals' inability to reconcile their personal aspirations with the disintegration of social cohesion.

DURKHEIM'S ANOMIE THEORY:

Durkheim's Anomie Theory explains that anomie happens when society's rules and values are unclear or don't work well anymore, especially during times of big change, like economic shifts

or cultural changes. When people don't know what is expected of them or how to behave, they can feel lost or disconnected.¹

This confusion can lead to **deviant behaviour or crime** because people don't know or follow the usual rules. Durkheim believed that in times of change, society's norms (rules for behavior) break down, and people may turn to illegal or harmful actions because they don't know how to reach their goals in a proper way.

So, in simple terms, Durkheim's theory says that when society's rules are unclear or don't work well, people might break the law because they don't know how to fit in or achieve what is expected of them.

Emile Durkheim's work on **anomie**² and the relationship between societal changes and deviant behaviour led him to propose two tests related to the effects of **economic prosperity** and **economic depression** on crime rates and societal stability. These tests are based on his observations of how fluctuations in the economy influence the level of social cohesion, norms, and the prevalence of criminal behaviour.

1. Test of Economic Prosperity:

Durkheim observed that during periods of **economic prosperity**, society tends to experience increased material wealth, a rise in social mobility, and opportunities for success. While prosperity may lead to more positive outcomes, Durkheim noted that it also carries potential risks for social stability.

- **Anomie During Prosperity:** As prosperity increases, people may focus more on material success, leading to heightened individualism and competition. This individualism can weaken social bonds and undermine collective norms. People may feel less attached to society's values and more focused on personal achievements, which creates a **disconnection from traditional norms**. In the absence of strong moral regulation, individuals may resort to deviant behavior, such as crime, to achieve their goals.

¹Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide* (Alcan 1897).

²George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory* 59–62 (9th ed. McGraw-Hill 2017).

- **Crime and Prosperity:** Durkheim argued that crime may rise during periods of prosperity because people, especially those unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means, might turn to illegitimate means (e.g., theft, fraud) to fulfill their desires for wealth or status. The **anomie effect** during prosperity occurs because, although there are more opportunities to achieve success, the means of achieving success might become unclear or excessively competitive, causing a breakdown in social norms.

Thus, during **economic prosperity**, the rapid social change associated with wealth and success can lead to anomie and an increase in crime due to **weakened social cohesion** and an **overemphasis on individual goals**.

2. Test of Economic Depression:

In contrast to economic prosperity, Durkheim's **test of economic depression** explores how a **downturn in the economy** affects social stability and crime rates. Economic depression refers to a period of reduced economic activity, widespread unemployment, and a decline in material wealth.

- **Anomie During Depression:** Durkheim argued that during periods of economic depression, there is a significant breakdown in the social order. As the economy worsens, unemployment rises, and people are unable to fulfil their material needs or social aspirations. This leads to feelings of **hopelessness** and **despair**, which contribute to a sense of **anomie** — individuals feel alienated, isolated, and disconnected from society.
- **Crime and Depression:** During depression, the strain on individuals and families increases. Those who are unable to meet their basic needs or pursue their goals through legitimate means may resort to crime or deviance as a coping mechanism. **Suicide rates** tend to increase during economic depressions, as Durkheim noted in his work on suicide, particularly the **anomic suicide** that occurs due to lack of direction in life. Additionally, crime rates related to property and survival (e.g., theft, robbery) may increase as individuals struggle to make ends meet.

However, Durkheim also noted that while crime might rise in depression, **social solidarity**

might also increase, as people band together in times of hardship. Despite the economic difficulties, the collective response to a depression can serve to stabilize society, particularly through social support systems and community networks.

ROBERT K. MERTON'S STRAIN THEORY: AN EXTENSION OF DURKHEIM'S ANOMIE:

In the 1930s, **Robert K. Merton**, an American sociologist, expanded on **Émile Durkheim's** idea of **anomie** with his own theory, called **strain theory**.³ Merton's theory explains how society's expectations can cause people to break the law or act deviant. The main idea is that society sets goals, like wealth or success, but it doesn't provide everyone with equal opportunities to achieve these goals. When people can't reach these goals through accepted methods, they feel **strain** and may turn to deviant behavior as a way to cope.

Society encourages everyone to aim for **common goals**, such as **success**, **wealth**, or **social status**. But not everyone has the same opportunities to achieve these goals. People from different backgrounds or poorer communities may not have access to education or good jobs. This creates a **gap** between the **goals** society sets and the **legitimate means** (like education, jobs, etc.) people can use to achieve them. This **gap** causes **strain** or frustration, and Merton says that this strain can lead people to act in ways that are considered **deviant** or **criminal**.

Five Ways People Adapt to Strain

Merton identified five ways that people might adapt to this strain:

1. Conformity:

- **Conformists** are the people who follow the rules. They **accept both** the societal goals (like success) and the legitimate means (like hard work or education) to achieve them. They don't resort to crime or deviance.

2. Innovation:

- **Innovators** still want the societal goals (like wealth or success) but **don't**

³Robert K. Merton, Social Structure and Anomie, 3 Am. Soc. Rev. 672 (1938).

follow the normal rules to get there. Instead, they come up with their own, often illegal, ways to achieve these goals. For example, a **criminal** might commit **theft, fraud, or drug dealing** to get rich.

3. Ritualism:

- **Ritualists** are people who give up on the goals of success or wealth but **stick to the accepted means** anyway. They go through the motions, doing things the "right" way, even though they don't expect to get rich or successful. An example could be someone who works hard at a job they don't enjoy but has no real hope of improving their life.

4. Retreatism:

- **Retreatists** give up both the goals and the means. These people drop out of society's race for success. They no longer try to become rich or successful and often turn to **substance abuse** or **addiction** as a way to escape the strain.

5. Rebellion:

- **Rebels** reject both the societal goals and the traditional ways of achieving them. Instead, they want to **create new goals** and methods. Rebels often challenge the system and may fight against social rules, like political activists or revolutionaries.

Merton's theory explains that **criminal behaviour** often comes from the **mode of innovation**. Innovators, who are unable to achieve success through legitimate means, **create new ways** (often illegal) to achieve societal goals. For example, someone who wants to become wealthy but can't get a good job might resort to **stealing, drug dealing, or scamming** people. Innovation is seen as the main way crime happens in Merton's theory.

ANOMIE THEORY AND ITS EVOLUTION: FROM DURKHEIM TO INSTITUTIONAL-ANOMIE THEORY:⁴

⁴Jón Gunnar Bernburg, Anomie, Social Change, and Crime: A Theoretical Examination of Institutional-Anomie Theory, 42 *Brit. J. Criminology* 729 (2002).

In Durkheim's classical formulation, anomie was most prominently observed during periods of **economic transformation**, such as industrialization or social upheaval, which disrupted social cohesion and weakened shared norms. As Durkheim explained, when society undergoes rapid changes, the traditional moral compass that once directed people's behavior becomes less effective, and individuals are left feeling alienated and unsure of their roles. This, in turn, creates a fertile ground for deviance, as people pursue their desires without sufficient social regulation.

Building upon Durkheim's foundational work, **Jón Gunnar Bernburg's 2002 article, "Anomie, Social Change and Crime: A Theoretical Examination of Institutional-Anomie Theory"** expands on the theory by integrating contemporary ideas and new perspectives. Bernburg examines how **institutional-anomie theory** (a more recent evolution of Durkheim's anomie theory) can explain the increasing rates of crime in modern societies, especially in contexts marked by social and economic change. The theory contends that crime is not merely a result of individual moral failings but is deeply embedded in the **institutional structures** of society, which can amplify the disintegration of social norms.

In his article, **Jón Gunnar Bernburg** explains that **Durkheim's idea of anomie** isn't just about individuals feeling lost or confused — it's also about problems in the whole society and its institutions. Bernburg talks about how **Robert K. Merton** expanded Durkheim's work by creating **strain theory**, showing that when people can't reach society's goals (like wealth) through fair means, they may turn to crime.

Bernburg then goes even further by discussing **institutional-anomie theory**, which says that in **capitalist societies**, economic goals become more important than other values like family, education, or religion. When making money is seen as the only way to succeed, people without fair opportunities (like good jobs or education) feel frustrated and may choose illegal ways to achieve success. This strong focus on money causes ongoing feelings of **anomie** (normlessness) and increases criminal behavior.

He also connects this idea to today's world. Bernburg points out that **modern changes** — like globalization, technology, and increasing gaps between the rich and poor — make it even harder for many people to succeed legally. As a result, crimes like fraud, theft, and embezzlement become more common, especially among those who feel excluded from economic opportunities.

In short, Bernburg shows that **anomie today is not just a personal feeling of confusion**, but a **big social problem**. When society focuses too much on money and forgets to support people through strong institutions, **crime rates can rise** because people lose trust in legitimate ways to succeed.

HOW SOCIETAL CHANGES LEAD TO INCREASED CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR:

1. Durkheim's Anomie Theory and Societal Changes⁵

According to Durkheim, **rapid social changes** can lead to a breakdown in the norms that guide people's behavior. When these norms (rules or guidelines) become unclear or inconsistent, people feel disconnected from society because they no longer know how to behave properly. This is what Durkheim calls **anomie** — a state of normlessness. In times of **social upheaval**⁶, such as when a society undergoes major economic or cultural changes, individuals may no longer know the accepted ways to achieve their goals, leading to confusion and frustration.

Without clear norms, people might turn to **deviant or criminal behavior** as a way of coping with the uncertainty. For example, during an economic crisis, when traditional jobs and opportunities are limited, people might resort to **crime**, like theft or fraud, to achieve what society values, such as financial success.

2. Merton's Strain Theory and Societal Changes

Merton's **strain theory** suggests that when societal changes create a **gap** between the goals people are encouraged to achieve (like wealth or success) and the legitimate means available to achieve those goals (like education or good jobs), people experience **strain**. This strain can lead to frustration, especially for those who don't have the resources or opportunities to succeed through traditional means.

In times of **economic inequality or social change**, some individuals may find themselves unable to achieve societal goals through **legitimate paths** (e.g., education, stable employment). To cope with this frustration, they may **resort to criminal behavior** by **innovating** new, often illegal, ways to achieve these goals — such as committing fraud, theft, or dealing drugs.

⁵Steven E. Barkan, *Criminology: A Sociological Understanding* 162–66 (8th ed. Pearson 2020).

⁶Franklin P. Williams & Marilyn D. McShane, *Criminological Theory* 111–15 (5th ed. Pearson 2014).

For instance, in a society where economic opportunities are limited for certain groups, people may feel pressured to resort to crime to reach the goal of wealth or status.

RELEVANCE AND ADAPTATION OF DURKHEIM'S AND MERTON'S THEORIES IN TODAY'S CONTEXT:

1. **Durkheim's Relevance in Contemporary Society:** Durkheim's theory remains relevant in understanding how societal breakdowns during times of rapid change can lead to an increase in crime. In today's context, global crises such as economic recessions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and technological disruptions have created environments of uncertainty, leading to a resurgence of deviant behaviors. Social media and the rapid spread of information have also contributed to social disintegration, leading to new forms of anomie, where individuals struggle to find a place in a rapidly evolving world.
2. **Merton's Strain Theory and Adaptation to Modern Contexts:** Merton's strain theory still holds value in explaining crime within socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. However, today's society may require adaptations to Merton's framework. For example, in addition to material success, modern goals also focus on social status and online recognition. The digital economy and gig work often offer limited legitimate avenues for success, which might increase strain and push individuals towards alternative, possibly criminal, paths. Moreover, strain theory needs to account for factors like mental health, social media pressure, and evolving social expectations that impact individuals' responses to strain.
3. **Relevance of Jón Gunnar Bernburg's Institutional-Anomie Theory:** Jón Gunnar Bernburg's Institutional-Anomie Theory is highly relevant in modern times as it explains how the dominance of economic values weakens other social institutions like family and education. In capitalist societies focused mainly on wealth and success, those with limited opportunities face frustration and alienation, increasing the chances of criminal behaviour. Bernburg's work highlights that crime stems not just from individual failure but from broader institutional and structural breakdowns, making it essential for understanding crime in today's unequal and fast-changing world.

CRITICISM AND IMPACT OF ANOMIE AND STRAIN THEORIES:

Aspect	Details
Criticism	
1. Overemphasis on Structure	Focus mainly on society's structure; ignore personal and emotional factors.
2. Neglect of White-Collar Crime	Fails to explain crimes by the wealthy (like fraud, corruption).
3. Too Broad and Vague	Concepts like "anomie" are difficult to test or measure scientifically.
4. Cultural Differences Ignored	Assumes all societies value wealth and success equally, which is not true.
5. Lack of Focus on Gender/Race	Does not consider how race, gender, and discrimination affect access to success.
Impact	
1. Foundation for Later Theories	Inspired subcultural theories, general strain theory, and institutional anomie theory.
2. Influenced Social Policies	Helped create programs to reduce inequality and crime through better education, jobs, etc.
3. Social Causes of Crime	Changed the view from "bad people" to "bad conditions" causing crime.
4. Development of Institutional-Anomie Theory	Expanded ideas linking economy and social institutions to crime.
5. Continued Relevance	Still used to explain crime related to poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity today.

CONCLUSION:

The Anomie and Strain theories by Emile Durkheim and Robert K. Merton explain how societal structures influence criminal behaviour. Durkheim's concept of anomie highlights how

rapid social changes can weaken norms, leading individuals to feel disconnected and engage in deviance. Merton built on this with his strain theory, showing that the gap between societal goals and the unequal means to achieve them causes frustration, leading some to turn to crime.

While these theories have been praised for their impact on criminology, they've also faced criticism for focusing too much on social structures and neglecting factors like individual, cultural, and emotional influences. Additionally, they don't fully address white-collar crimes or issues like race and gender. Despite these critiques, their influence remains significant, shaping later criminological theories and public policies aimed at reducing inequality. Today, with economic instability and growing inequality, Durkheim and Merton's ideas remain relevant in understanding crime as a social issue rather than a moral failure.

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