

# Criminal Behavior: Attitudes, Causes & Prevention

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## Attitudes toward Criminal Behavior: An Introduction

Attitudes toward criminal behavior constitute a critical area of study within psychological criminology and social psychology, serving as powerful internal determinants of human action and reaction within the legal and social framework. These attitudes represent a complex psychosocial construct, defined generally as an individual's evaluative orientation--be it positive, negative, or neutral--toward crime itself, the individuals who commit offenses, and the mechanisms of the criminal justice system designed to respond to these actions. Understanding these dispositions is paramount, as they not only predict an individual's likelihood of engaging in deviant or criminal acts but also shape public support for various social policies, from penal reform to community policing initiatives. Crucially, attitudes are not merely passive opinions; they are organized systems of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral intentions that guide information processing and decision-making, particularly under conditions of moral uncertainty or social pressure. The study of these attitudes bridges the gap between abstract moral reasoning and concrete behavioral outcomes, offering insights into the etiology of crime and the potential for effective intervention.

The distinction between attitudes held by the general public versus those held by active offenders is central to this field. Public attitudes often focus on perceived risk, fear of victimization, and the perceived appropriateness of punishment, reflecting a desire for social order and retribution. Conversely, attitudes held by those involved in criminal activity frequently involve rationalizations, justifications, and a devaluation of legal norms, often referred to collectively as **pro-criminal attitudes**. These pro-criminal orientations serve a functional purpose for the offender, reducing cognitive dissonance by aligning behavior with internal beliefs, thereby facilitating continued engagement in illegal activities. Therefore, measuring and modifying these deeply held beliefs is often considered the cornerstone of successful rehabilitation programs, aiming to replace definitions favorable to law violation with definitions favorable to conformity.

The formal analysis of attitudes in this context demands a high level of precision, recognizing that these constructs are multidimensional and subject to constant flux based on environmental inputs and personal experiences. The psychological framework posits that attitudes are learned, maintained, and sometimes radically altered through processes of socialization, exposure to media, and direct personal interaction with the justice system or victims of crime. The subsequent sections will detail the structural components of these attitudes, the theoretical models explaining their formation, the methodologies employed for their measurement, and their pervasive implications for policy and intervention efforts aimed at reducing recidivism and enhancing public safety across diverse populations.

## The Nature and Components of Attitudes

Psychologists typically utilize the tripartite model, or the ABC model, to delineate the structure of

an attitude, asserting that every attitude comprises three interacting components: Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive. Applied to criminal behavior, the **Cognitive component** refers to an individual's beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts about crime. This includes factual beliefs, such as the perceived statistics on recidivism rates or the effectiveness of capital punishment, as well as subjective beliefs, such as the perception that certain crimes are victimless or that the justice system is inherently biased. These cognitive elements provide the rational and informational basis for the attitude, often relying on schemas and stereotypes developed through media exposure or personal anecdotes, rather than empirical data.

The **Affective component** encompasses the emotional reactions and feelings associated with the attitude object. When considering criminal behavior, this component manifests as feelings of anger, fear, sympathy, moral outrage, or even excitement or gratification, depending on the individual's perspective (e.g., victim, observer, or offender). For instance, an individual who has been victimized may harbor intense fear and anger toward all offenders, while an offender may feel excitement or pride in demonstrating defiance toward authority. These affective reactions are often immediate and powerful, frequently preceding and overriding rational cognitive processing, making them particularly difficult targets for psychotherapeutic intervention aimed at attitude modification.

Finally, the **Behavioral component** refers to the past actions, current intentions, and behavioral tendencies related to the attitude object. This component does not necessarily mean the individual acts criminally, but rather reflects their predisposition to act in certain ways. For the general public, this might involve voting for particular political candidates based on their crime platform, joining a neighborhood watch, or expressing willingness to cooperate with law enforcement. For the offender population, the behavioral component manifests as expressed intentions to re-offend, unwillingness to participate fully in rehabilitation programs, or the active seeking out of pro-criminal peer groups. The alignment, or lack thereof, between these three components--Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral--is crucial for determining the strength and stability of the overall attitude, and thus its predictive power regarding future actions.

## Theories of Attitude Formation Regarding Crime

The formation of attitudes toward criminal behavior is rarely accidental; rather, it is systematically shaped by fundamental psychological and sociological learning processes. One of the most influential frameworks is **Social Learning Theory**, particularly as articulated through concepts like Differential Association Theory. This perspective argues that criminal attitudes, like any other attitudes, are acquired primarily through intimate personal interaction within small groups, such as family, peers, and close associates. The learning involves not only the techniques of committing crime but, more importantly, the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes favorable to the violation of the law. The frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of these associations determine the extent to which an individual internalizes definitions favorable to crime

over definitions favorable to conformity.

In addition to direct learning, **Cognitive Theories** emphasize the role of internal mental processes in attitude construction. Schemes of neutralization, first proposed by Sykes and Matza, illustrate a key cognitive mechanism where offenders develop specific rationalizations that temporarily suspend moral constraints, allowing them to drift into delinquency without fully abandoning conventional norms. These techniques--such as denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties--are essentially cognitive attitudes that preemptively justify criminal acts. For instance, an individual might rationalize theft by believing the victim can afford the loss (denial of injury), thereby maintaining a self-image that is not wholly 'bad' despite the illegal behavior. These cognitive distortions must be firmly established as attitudes before they can consistently guide criminal action.

Furthermore, **Social Identity Theory** highlights the role of group membership in shaping attitudes toward crime and justice. Individuals derive self-esteem and identity from their group affiliations, leading them to adopt the norms and attitudes of the in-group while potentially showing hostility or derogation toward the out-group, which may include law enforcement or victims. For individuals deeply embedded in gang culture, for example, pro-criminal attitudes are not just personal beliefs but are reinforced by the group identity, serving as markers of loyalty and acceptance. This social reinforcement makes such attitudes highly resistant to change, as abandoning them often implies abandoning the core social group that provides psychological security and belonging, demonstrating the profound interplay between individual cognition and external social structure in attitude formation.

## Measurement and Assessment Methodologies

Accurately measuring attitudes toward criminal behavior presents significant methodological challenges, primarily due to the inherent sensitivity of the topic and the prevalence of **social desirability bias**--the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a way that will be viewed favorably by others. Consequently, researchers employ a variety of techniques designed to capture both explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) attitudes with maximal reliability and validity. The most common approach involves self-report measures, utilizing structured questionnaires and psychometric scales.

The typical self-report instruments include Likert scales, where respondents indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding specific crimes, offenders, or justice policies (e.g., "Prison sentences should always prioritize retribution over rehabilitation"). Specialized instruments, such as the Criminal Sentiments Scale or similar validated measures, are frequently used in correctional settings to quantify the degree of pro-criminal thinking, often focusing on items related to authority resistance, justification of violence, and lack of empathy. While cost-effective and easy to

administer, the validity of these explicit measures is heavily reliant on the respondent's honesty and self-awareness, necessitating supplementary methods to probe deeper psychological layers.

To mitigate the effects of social desirability and access automatic evaluative associations, researchers increasingly utilize **Implicit Association Tests (IATs)**. The IAT measures the strength of automatic mental associations between concepts (e.g., "crime" and "good" vs. "crime" and "bad") by analyzing response times to paired stimuli. Faster response times indicate stronger, more automatic associations, providing a measure of implicit attitudes that individuals may be unwilling or unable to consciously report. Furthermore, behavioral observation and projective techniques, such as the use of hypothetical vignettes or scenarios requiring moral judgment, can provide qualitative data on attitudinal structures. When assessing attitudes for clinical purposes, especially within forensic psychology, a comprehensive approach integrating clinical interviews, behavioral records, and validated psychometric scales is mandatory to ensure a robust and actionable assessment of criminogenic attitudes.

## Key Determinants of Criminal Attitudes

The development of attitudes toward crime is influenced by a complex confluence of individual, social, and environmental factors. Among the most potent determinants are **peer and family influences**, particularly during the formative years of adolescence. Research consistently demonstrates that association with delinquent peers is one of the strongest predictors of adopting pro-criminal attitudes, as peer groups provide the immediate context for normalizing deviance and modeling attitudes favorable to law violation. Similarly, parental attitudes toward authority, discipline styles, and parental involvement in the child's life significantly shape the child's early moral schema and respect for legal boundaries. Disorganized or conflict-ridden family environments often fail to instill the necessary conventional attitudes, leaving the individual more susceptible to external, delinquent influences.

Personal experiences, including both **victimization and prior involvement in the criminal justice system**, profoundly shape attitudes. Individuals who have been victims of crime often develop heightened fear, distrust of others, and strong punitive attitudes toward offenders, frequently supporting harsher sentencing policies. Conversely, individuals who have gone through the correctional system often develop attitudes characterized by cynicism, resentment toward authority, and a sense of alienation, particularly if they perceive the system as unfair or discriminatory. These negative experiences can solidify anti-social attitudes and reinforce the belief that conventional life is inaccessible or undesirable, creating a powerful feedback loop that sustains a criminal lifestyle.

Finally, **media consumption and cultural exposure** play a significant, albeit often indirect, role. Cultivation theory suggests that heavy exposure to violent or crime-focused media can distort

perceptions of reality, leading viewers to overestimate the prevalence of crime and harbor greater fear of victimization, thereby contributing to more punitive public attitudes. Furthermore, the media's portrayal of offenders, often focusing on sensationalism or extreme cases, can influence the public's affective response, shaping attitudes toward specific demographic groups perceived as criminal. These societal narratives contribute to the broader subjective norms that either support or discourage definitions favorable to law violation, demonstrating that attitude formation is a continuous process mediated by the cultural environment.

## The Link Between Attitudes and Behavior

While intuition suggests a direct causal link between holding a pro-criminal attitude and engaging in criminal behavior, the relationship is nuanced and mediated by several psychological factors, often referred to as the attitude-behavior gap. The **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** provides a useful framework for understanding this mediation, positing that the immediate determinant of behavior is the behavioral intention, which is itself shaped by three key variables: the attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioral control (the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior). Thus, an individual may hold a positive attitude toward theft, but if they perceive strong social disapproval (subjective norm) or believe they lack the skills to execute the theft successfully without being caught (low perceived behavioral control), the intention to act, and thus the behavior itself, may not materialize.

For individuals who consistently engage in criminal behavior, attitudes often serve as powerful cognitive primes that reduce the friction involved in making illegal choices. These attitudes, once automatized, allow the individual to rapidly process situations and justify actions without extensive moral deliberation. For example, a deeply ingrained attitude of disdain toward authority figures permits an immediate, reflexive hostile response during a confrontation with law enforcement. This automaticity highlights the importance of attitude strength; strongly held, consistent attitudes that are easily accessible in memory are far more predictive of behavior than weak, ambivalent attitudes.

Furthermore, the principle of **Cognitive Consistency** dictates that individuals are motivated to maintain harmony between their attitudes and their actions. When a person commits a crime that conflicts with their prior conventional attitudes, they experience cognitive dissonance--an uncomfortable psychological tension. To resolve this dissonance, the individual often changes their attitude to align with the behavior, frequently through the adoption of rationalizations or neutralizations that justify the action retroactively. This process reinforces the new, pro-criminal attitude, making future criminal acts easier to commit. Therefore, the link between attitude and behavior is bidirectional: attitudes predict behavior, and subsequent behavior reinforces the underlying attitudes, creating a cycle that is difficult to disrupt without targeted psychological intervention.

## Attitudes in the Context of Rehabilitation and Recidivism

In the field of correctional psychology, attitudes toward criminal behavior are recognized as a core **criminogenic need**--a dynamic risk factor that, when changed, leads to a reduction in recidivism. This recognition is foundational to the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, which guides effective correctional treatment. Pro-criminal attitudes, characterized by anti-social values, hostility toward authority, and the use of rationalizations, are consistently identified as one of the strongest psychological predictors of re-offending across diverse offender populations, necessitating their direct targeting in therapeutic interventions.

The most effective methods for modifying these entrenched attitudes are rooted in **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** and its specialized variants, such as Cognitive Skills Training. The therapeutic goal is not simply to teach compliance but to achieve fundamental cognitive restructuring. This involves systematically challenging the offender's distorted thinking patterns, such as their techniques of neutralization, minimizing of harm, and self-serving justifications. Therapists work to expose the logical fallacies and self-defeating nature of these attitudes, replacing them with pro-social beliefs, enhanced problem-solving skills, and a greater capacity for empathy.

Successful rehabilitation hinges on the sustained alteration of these internal attitudes. For instance, an offender must move beyond merely stating that crime is wrong (superficial compliance) to genuinely internalizing pro-social values and developing an affective response (guilt or shame) that prevents future criminal ideation. Attitude change is often measured by observing a reduction in hostile or cynical statements, an increased willingness to consider the victim's perspective, and a demonstrated ability to use pro-social coping mechanisms when faced with high-risk situations. The persistence of pro-criminal attitudes post-release is a powerful indicator of high risk for recidivism, underscoring the necessity of intensive, long-term therapeutic engagement focused specifically on cognitive and attitudinal change.

## Societal and Policy Implications

Attitudes toward criminal behavior held by the broader society critically influence the formulation and implementation of criminal justice policies. Public opinion often oscillates between attitudes favoring pure deterrence and retribution and those advocating for rehabilitation and restorative justice. When public attitudes are dominated by fear and the desire for punishment, policy tends toward "tough on crime" measures, such as mandatory minimum sentencing, increased police funding, and reduced resources for community-based programs. These policies, while satisfying the public's punitive affective component, may not necessarily align with evidence-based practices for reducing crime.

Conversely, shifts in public attitudes toward valuing redemption, rehabilitation, and addressing root

causes--often catalyzed by high-profile cases or increased awareness of systemic inequalities--can drive policy reform. For example, growing awareness of the neuroscience of adolescent development has shifted attitudes regarding juvenile justice, prompting policies that favor rehabilitation over punitive measures for young offenders. These attitudinal changes among policymakers and the electorate are essential prerequisites for substantive systemic reform, demonstrating that criminal justice is not purely technical but deeply embedded in societal values and moral attitudes.

Ultimately, understanding and managing attitudes toward criminal behavior is key to creating a just and effective criminal justice system. Educational initiatives aimed at the public can help moderate extreme punitive attitudes by providing accurate information on crime rates and the effectiveness of various interventions, reducing the influence of media sensationalism. For the offender, clinical efforts must remain focused on cognitive restructuring as the primary mechanism for reducing future risk. By accurately assessing, targeting, and modifying both individual pro-criminal attitudes and broad societal punitive attitudes, the psychological understanding of crime can directly inform evidence-based practices that promote both public safety and long-term social integration.