



Larry J. Siegel

[www.cengage.com/cj/siegel](http://www.cengage.com/cj/siegel)

# Chapter Four

## *Rational Choice Theory*

Dennis Souther Pfeiffer University, Misenheimer, NC

# Development of Rational Choice Theory

- Classical Criminology
  - Roots of rational choice theory
  - Developed by Cesare Beccaria
- *Thinking About Crime*
  - James Q. Wilson
  - More contemporary version of classical theory based on intelligent thought processes

# Class Discussion/Activity

Discuss the underlying assumptions about human decision making made by Cesare Beccaria and Becker. What is the importance of these assumptions for classical theory?

# Concepts of Rational Choice

- Evaluating the Risks of Crime
  - Crime is avoided when risks outweigh rewards
- Offense-Specific Crime
- Offender-Specific Crime

# Concepts of Rational Choice

- Structuring Criminality
  - Economic need/opportunity
  - Evaluating personal traits and experience
  - Criminal expertise

# Concepts of Rational Choice

- Structuring Crime
  - Choosing the place of crime
  - Choosing targets
  - Creating scripts

# Class Discussion/Activity

- 1) Imagine you were a burglar. What script would you follow to avoid detection?
- 2) How may the police use the fact that offenders follow certain scripts?

# Is Crime Truly Rational?

- Rational choice approach: the decision to commit crime, regardless of its substance, is structured by
  - where it occurs,
  - the characteristics of the target.
- Is drug use rational?
- Is violence rational?

# Why Do People Commit Crime?

- Edgework
  - Exhilarating, momentary integration of danger, risk, and skill
- Seductions of crime
  - Situation inducements or immediate benefits that draw offenders into law violations

# Why Do People Commit Crime?

- **Situational Crime Prevention**
  - Seeks to reduce or eliminate particular crimes in specific settings
  - Criminal acts will be avoided if:
    - Potential targets are carefully guarded
    - The means to commit crime are controlled
    - Potential offenders are carefully monitored
  - Defensible space

# Controlling Crime

- Crime Prevention Strategies
  - Increase the effort needed to commit crime
  - Increase the risk of committing crime
  - Reduce rewards of crime
  - Induce guilt: increase crime
  - Reduce provocation
  - Remove excuses

# Controlling Crime

- Evaluating Situational Crime Prevention
  - Hidden benefits
    - Diffusion
    - Discouragement
  - Hidden costs
    - Displacement
    - Extinction
  - Replacement

# Class Discussion/Activity

Women who apply for a restraining order against their abusive husbands, boyfriends, or a stalker must reveal their home address to the offender. The purpose is to allow the offender to stay away from the women's home as required by the restraining order.

- 1.What problems do you anticipate with this requirement?
- 2.If you had a stalker and you are fairly certain that he doesn't know your address would you file for a restraining order?

# General Deterrence

- Fear of criminal penalties convinces potential law violator that pains of crime outweigh its benefits.
- Perception and Deterrence
  - The *perception* that punishment will be forthcoming influences criminality.
  - Some individuals and classes of offenders are more deteritable than others.

# General Deterrence

- Punishment and Deterrence
- Certainty of Punishment
  - Police and Certainty of Punishment
- Severity of Punishment
- Swiftness of Punishment
  - Interrelationship of factors

# General Deterrence

- Evaluating General Deterrence
  - Rationality
  - System effectiveness
  - Criminals discount punishments
  - Some offenders – and some crimes – are more “deterrable” than others.

# Specific Deterrence

- The view that criminal sanctions should be so powerful that offenders will never repeat their criminal acts.
- Incarceration may delay recidivism.
- Harshest treatment may increase rather than reduce crime.
  - Punishment may breed defiance rather than deterrence
  - Harshest punishments may cause psychological problems
  - Neighborhoods may feel victimized

# Incapacitation

- Incapacitation Effect
  - The idea that keeping offenders in confinement will eliminate the risk of their committing further offenses.
  - One in every one hundred American adults is behind bars.
  - Due to policy implications there have been periods of time where increases in incarceration rates increased while overall crime was decreasing.

# Policy Implications of Choice Theory

## CONCEPT SUMMARY 4.1 Choice Theories

Theory	Major Premise	Strengths	Research Focus
<b>Rational choice</b>	Law-violating behavior occurs after offenders weigh information on their personal needs and the situational factors involved in the difficulty and risk of committing a crime.	Explains why high-risk youths do not constantly engage in delinquency. Relates theory to delinquency control policy. It is not limited by class or other social variables.	Offense patterns—where, when, and how crime takes place.
<b>General deterrence</b>	People will commit crime and delinquency if they perceive that the benefits outweigh the risks. Crime is a function of the severity, certainty, and speed of punishment.	Shows the relationship between crime and punishment. Suggests a real solution to crime.	Perception of punishment, effect of legal sanctions, probability of punishment, and crime rates.
<b>Specific deterrence</b>	If punishment is severe enough, criminals will not repeat their illegal acts.	Provides a strategy to reduce crime.	Recidivism, repeat offending, punishment type, and crime.
<b>Incapacitation</b>	Keeping known criminals out of circulation will reduce crime rates.	Recognizes the role that opportunity plays in criminal behavior. Provides a solution to chronic offending.	Prison population and crime rates, sentence length, and crime.

# Policy Implications of Choice Theory

- Effects of arrest quickly decay and may actually escalate the frequency of repeat domestic violence.
  - Initial fear of arrest did not result in severe punishment.
  - Fear may be replaced with anger and violent intent toward the abused mate.
- “Three-strikes and your out” laws
  - Appeals to public sentiments but may be a premature method.

# Policy Implications of Choice Theory

- Death Penalty
  - Is it a deterrent?
  - Wrongful convictions