

Psychology, Not Circumstances: Understanding Crime as Entitlement

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Introduction

Among many criminologists, advocates, and policymakers, it is an article of faith that the socioeconomic “root causes” of serious crime must be addressed in order to reduce lawbreaking. However, the enormous crime declines over the course of the late 1990s and early 2000s occurred without significant improvements in socioeconomic conditions.¹ Even so, academics, policymakers, and criminal-justice advocates continue to insist that poverty drives offending rates and that it is thus essential for society to target poverty through increased social and capital investments. This paper explores a phenomenon that contradicts that claim—and, in fact, indicates that creating a system with enforced rules and consequences for lawbreaking is key to reducing crime. We call this: “crime as entitlement.”

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In the psychological literature, “entitlement” is a term that essentially refers to a frame of mind that prioritizes the whims, wants, and needs of the individual above the rights, desires, and needs of others. Entitlement thinking goes beyond normal selfishness because it elevates the belief that one is deserving of special treatment, unearned privileges, and respect—independent of effort. The consequences of entitlement thinking are devastating. Entitlement thinking divorces individuals from personal responsibility; it impedes recognition of the consequences that stem from the individual’s behavior; and it leads the individual to view wants and desires as rights whose pursuit is beyond reproach.

The manifestation of entitlement in individual behavior is common—indeed, nearly universal—across humanity in early childhood. This is something to which anyone who has witnessed a toddler’s temper tantrum can attest. For most of us, entitlement is resolved early on in life, as the result of parenting, discipline, and the internalization of behavioral consequences. But for those whose self-absorption and self-centeredness remain unchecked, entitlement metastasizes, which can lead to imprudent and antisocial behavior. Over time, unchecked entitlement can breed arrogant self-indulgence and become foundational to conduct and personality disorders.

The psychiatric and psychological science of entitlement is well established and far-reaching in its application. In the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, entitlement is defined as “unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations” and is one of the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder—a condition involving pervasive grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.²

Entitlement is an active ingredient in personality pathology where the exploitation and victimization of others are as essential to one’s daily needs as food and shelter.

While entitlement does not always present itself in the form of criminal conduct, many criminal offenders—whose offending behavior ranges from disorderly conduct and confidence scheming to sexual predation and homicide—share commonalities in their mind-sets, their behavioral expectations, and their preferred responses to their own behavior.³ Those mind-sets and expectations, which are expounded on below, reveal entitlement as an important, yet underexplored, driver of a significant amount of criminal behavior.

In his book *Inside the Criminal Mind*, Dr. Stanton Samenow argues: “Behavior is a product of thinking, and so it is incumbent upon anyone formulating policy or working with offenders to understand how criminals think.”⁴ To that end, we first explain the role of entitlement in criminal thinking patterns and, by extension, criminal behavior; and, second, we explore the policy implications of crime as entitlement.

The Path to Entitled Criminality

Entitlement is salient to a host of behavioral disorders affecting children, adolescents, and adults. But, as with most things, the path to entitled criminality begins during childhood.

Perhaps the most aptly named behavioral disorder in children—oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)—is a disruptive behavioral disorder characterized by angry and irritable mood, argumentativeness, defiance, and vindictiveness.⁵ Core symptoms of ODD include the active refusal to comply with behavioral requests from authority figures (such as parents and teachers) and the defiant reaction to any attempts to thwart the child’s behavioral impulses. When an adult, especially a nonparent, confronts a normatively behaved child, the usual response on the part of the child is a manifestation of fear, such as crying, upon being sanctioned. A child with ODD, on the other hand, tends not only to refrain from crying in such situations but will also indignantly challenge the adult. Such challenges stem from the child’s sense of entitlement to behave in the manner found objectionable by the adult attempting to sanction him.

Once on this pathway, some children go on to develop adolescent conduct disorder (CD), a pervasive pattern of violating the rights of others and refusing to conduct oneself in accordance with behavioral norms.⁶ Relative to ODD, adolescent CD is a more nefarious disorder infused with aggression and delinquency; but, as with its antecedent condition, an almost-complete

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disinterest in rules and regulations designed for conventional behavior is central to it. This is because such rules are impediments to the pursuit of one's behavioral wants. A note taken during the assessment of an institutionalized delinquent as part of the practical work of coauthor DeLisi illustrates this condition: "He is without remorse, thoroughly antisocial, and he likes it. He has no interest in complying with facility rules and will continue to do whatever he wants, to whomever."⁷

In adulthood, the developmental progression can culminate in antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), typified by an enduring disregard for, or violation of, the rights of others. ASPD is clinically defined by a "pattern of socially irresponsible, exploitative, and guiltless behaviour."⁸ "Symptoms include failure to conform to law, failure to sustain consistent employment, manipulation of others for personal gain, deception of others, and failure to develop stable interpersonal relationships."⁹ ASPD is relatively rare in the general population, with prevalence averaging between 2% and 3% (2%–4% for men and 0.5%–1% in women).¹⁰ Among male prisoners, however, prevalence estimates have ranged from 40% to 70%¹¹—an overrepresentation among the inmate population, as compared with the general population that substantially exceeds many of the other disparities that receive the lion's share of attention in the public discourse about criminal-justice policy.

The Relationship Between Entitlement and Criminality

ASPD is endemic to correctional populations and characterizes the most recalcitrant criminal offenders.¹² Entitlement thinking is deeply intertwined with ASPD and is often expressed through an overhyped sense of self-importance that undergirds the anger that follows the denial of what antisocial offenders believe is their due. On the street and in prison, allegations of "disrespect" often lead to murder and other violent confrontations.¹³ Entitlement thinking helps facilitate the rapid devolvement of what should be trivial encounters—such as one inmate inadvertently bumping into another—into brutally violent ones.

In an influential conceptual model, personality psychologists Joshua B. Grubbs and Julie J. Exline frame entitlement as a "cognitive-personality source of vulnerability to psychological distress."¹⁴ According to Grubbs and Exline, entitled persons have exaggerated expectations, notions of the self as special, and inflated deservedness—all of which make them vulnerable to unmet expectations involving disappointment, ego threat, and perceived injustice. When the expectations of the entitled are violated, they experience distress in the form of dissatisfaction and anger—the latter of which contributes to interpersonal conflict involving aggression and criminal violence. Importantly, the psychological distress of unmet expectations reinforces entitlement. As a result, highly entitled individuals are intransigent in their belief in their own superiority and what, to their minds, ought to flow to them on that basis. This phenomenon is put on display by offenders who view contact with the criminal-justice system as an affront to their right to live as they see fit, further feeding their sense of indignation and perception of society as unjust.

A number of psychological and criminological studies substantiate entitlement as critical to an accurate understanding of antisocial conduct and aggression. In laboratory settings, entitlement is among the best predictors of various forms of aggression¹⁵ and is consistent with a highly antagonistic approach toward interpersonal dealings that is positively correlated with odd and eccentric (Cluster A) and dramatic and emotional (Cluster B) personality disorders.¹⁶ Entitlement is also a critical variable that distinguishes males who perpetrate sexual aggression

and violence from those who do not; and its presence consistently correlates with a host of negative sexual behaviors, including unwanted sexual contact, infidelity, pathological promiscuity, sexual coercion, and sexual assault.¹⁷

Consider the following examples of the manifestation of entitlement in serious crime.

In Colorado in May 2020, police arrested Kelvin Watson for attempted first-degree murder for shooting a cook at a Waffle House restaurant who told Watson that he would have to wear a mask. Indignant about the mask regulation, and not wanting to wear one, Watson simply shot the victim, outraged that the worker would tell him otherwise.¹⁸ After his 140th arrest, Charles Barry thanked Democratic legislators in New York for its bail reform legislation, a policy producing almost immediate release of arrestees, including career criminals. Barry referred to the reform as “lit” because it effectively allowed him to commit crime with impunity.¹⁹ Decades ago, when asked why he perpetrated so many sexual homicides, the loquacious serial murderer Ted Bundy quipped, “There are just so many people,” implying that the population was sufficiently large that he should be able to do what he wanted to it.²⁰ In preparation for their mass murder at Columbine High School in 1999, murderer Eric Harris glibly asked his codefendant, Dylan Klebold, “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?”²¹

Societal Reinforcement of Entitlement Thinking

Since the 1960s, public policy, as well as the broader cultural zeitgeist, has reinforced entitlement thinking. For example, in recent years during episodes of social unrest, the distinction between rioters and mere protesters has been consistently elided by the news media, which often portray the former as freedom fighters justifiably raging against oppressive social structures. Consider former Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who told constituents that she “gave those who wished to destroy space to do that,” during the unrest that followed the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.²²

The increasingly common political responses to two interrelated social problems—drug abuse and homelessness²³—further exemplify society’s reinforcement of entitlement thinking. Much like the behavioral disorders discussed above, drug use is far less prevalent in the general population than it is in correctional settings—even when you exclude those incarcerated primarily for drug-related offenses. Data from the National Survey of Drug Use and Health indicate that 79.2% of Americans over the age of 12 have not used an illicit drug in the past year; half the population has *never* used an illicit drug.²⁴ A Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report, using data from 2007–09, found that 58% of state prisoners and 63% of sentenced jail inmates met the diagnostic criteria for drug abuse or dependence.²⁵ Many of these offenders reported using drugs at the time of the offense for which they were incarcerated.²⁶ Despite the association between drug use and crime, the decriminalization of drug offenses has prevailed in recent years as the popular approach to the problems associated with drug abuse.

Drug abuse can initiate a cascade of behavioral problems, the downstream effects of which increase the likelihood of homelessness.²⁷ The U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 50% of homeless individuals in the U.S. have a substance use disorder. As a result, major cities across the country now have sizable public spaces in which street persons openly sell and consume illicit drugs, ranging from crack cocaine to heroin.²⁸ These open violations of behavioral norms are often met with a hands-off approach on the part of policymakers—an approach informed by the rhetoric of activists, who have successfully recast the enforcement

of laws against sidewalk encampments and drug use as mistreatment of those who cannot help themselves. In a clinical setting, this would constitute the sort of enabling that would be expected to feed the patient's sense of entitlement.

Enabling of criminal entitlement is now woven into politically progressive enclaves, where criminal-justice policy debates are driven in significant part by concerns for the harms that enforcement can inflict on offenders. In a recent report on rioting issued by the Major Cities Chiefs Association, over half of the police departments in America's largest cities reported that local district attorneys often refused to prosecute arrested protesters—even when video evidence of their criminal conduct was available.²⁹ Portland, Oregon, for example, only prosecuted 144 individuals out of 1,028 cases, according to the report. Progressive prosecutors in New York City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco simply refused to prosecute many of those arrested. Even in Dallas, a progressive prosecutor dismissed more than 600 cases after a night of violent rioting. Restraint by criminal-justice officials is often lauded by the public, but restraint is easily converted into enabling—if not approval by—those criminally entitled.

The removal of criminal consequences—from failing to prosecute offenders, to eliminating bail and pretrial detention, to decarceration, to defunding the police—has likely affected the criminal calculations of offenders. Suffused with entitlement, progressive reforms take the coddling of offenders to another level. Active criminals, for example, often have intimate knowledge of the inner workings of their local justice system. They know officers, prosecutors, and judges by name, are often aware of the shifts worked by police, and know the likely sanctions if caught. For many, progressive criminal-justice reform is a green light to act out their predations.

Policy Implications

Having explained the role of entitlement in criminal offending patterns, the question of what this all means for social interventions aimed at prevention and rehabilitation remains. The answer is straightforward: those seeking to craft such interventions through public policymaking must reorient their approaches around an understanding of entitlement as one of the single most important “root causes” of crime—one that cannot be treated by financial benevolence from the state. Doing so means that policymakers must also grapple with the reality that, to date, the psychological interventions with the most promising prospects of addressing entitlement and treating the conditions associated with it are far from constituting cures; difficult to execute; and even more difficult to scale across an offender population as large as that of the U.S.,³⁰ which saw more than a million violent index offenses committed in 2019 alone, not to mention nearly 7 million property index offenses.³¹

The prevalence of entitlement among criminal offenders is almost certainly a major contributor to the failure of so many correctional interventions to reduce recidivism. The data on recidivism in the U.S. are revealing: a 2018 BJS report tracked a sample of 400,000 offenders released from prisons across 30 states in 2005 and found that 83%—five out of every six—had been rearrested at least once by 2014.³² On average, the released prisoners tracked generated five arrests each, over the nine-year observation period.³³

Entitlement is a core feature of the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS), which is used for the risk assessment of inmates in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.³⁴ Research shows entitlement to be among the strongest criminal thinking tendencies associated with repeat offending;³⁵ and repeat offenders are (and have long been) key drivers of serious crime in the United States. According to a BJS study, almost 40% of the violent felons convicted in America's 75 largest counties over the 12-year period of 1990–2002 had an active criminal-justice status

at the time of their arrest.³⁶ Another BJS report on prisoner recidivism notes that, on average, released state prisoners (in 2005) had been arrested nearly 11 times and convicted on almost five previous occasions.³⁷ In 2017, researchers at the University of Chicago found that the average offender charged with a shooting or homicide in that city had 12 prior arrests.³⁸ And, of course, a large body of research documents the phenomenon of career criminality that these statistics partly reflect.³⁹

Ultimately, the underappreciation of the role that entitlement thinking plays in crime has three important policy implications:

- First, it runs the risk of leading far too many scholars, public intellectuals, and policymakers to approach crime policy from the assumption that the main driver of criminality (especially violent criminality) is economic deprivation.
- Second, it risks feeding an overestimation of society's capacity to develop and deploy workable and sustainable interventions to the psychological underpinnings of criminal offending.
- These two implications lead to the third, which is that to the extent that entitlement is deeply engrained in criminal offenders, incapacitation and deterrence will continue to be ends best served by state sanctions for criminal conduct, as well as the most effective means by which society can hope to minimize the exposure of vulnerable individuals to criminal victimization.

Conclusion

Entitlement pervades contemporary narratives about criminal behavior and responses to it. It is not just that antisocial individuals feel entitled to perpetrate any behavior they wish, including violent felonies. A massive infrastructure of politicians, policymakers, academics, and, at times, even criminal-justice practitioners, similarly behave as if criminals are justified to commit crimes—and as if responding to those crimes in a legal, lawful, enforcement capacity is itself wrongheaded. The moral evaluation of conduct is inverted: criminals are conceptualized as good guys who should follow their whimsy, and the justice system is cast as the villain who is to blame for not honoring that entitlement. While many decision-makers may be motivated by an admirable sense of compassion, it is imperative that they understand that this sympathy is misplaced and that rules, deterrence, and enforced consequences are necessary to curb criminals and protect the innocent.

Endnotes

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