



# MAJOR CRIMINOLOGY THEORIES

## AND HOW THEY AFFECT POLICY



### RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

#### TOUGH ON CRIME

The U.S. justice system is largely influenced by a classical criminology theory, *rational choice theory*, which assumes that the choice to commit a crime arises out of a **logical judgment of cost versus reward**. This theory emphasizes punishment as the best means to deter individuals from committing crimes: Make the cost sufficiently outweigh the reward and individuals will decide that crime is not worth it.<sup>1</sup>



### BIOLOGICAL AND BIOSOCIAL THEORIES

#### ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES

Classical *biological and biosocial theories* of criminality stated that people are **"born criminals"** who cannot be deterred from committing crimes: Whether due to mental or physical disability, criminals cannot learn to control themselves.



### SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

#### LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

*Social learning theory* proposes that we engage in either criminal or noncriminal behavior based on the social environment around us, and that we're especially influenced by how other people reward or model behavior. This theory asserts that **criminal behaviors are learned** and therefore can be counteracted by developing a social environment in which criminal behavior is not normalized.<sup>2</sup>



### LABELING THEORY

#### ONCE A CRIMINAL, ALWAYS A CRIMINAL

*Labeling theory* proposes that **applying a label**, whether that means informally designating a youth as a "bad kid" or a "troublemaker" or a more formal arrest or incarceration record, has a long-term effect on a given person. Policies inspired by labeling theory were popular in the 1970s, but they were perceived as ineffective and fell out of use, replaced by "tough on crime" rational choice approaches.