

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Bennett, William J., John J. Dilulio, Jr., and  
John P. Walters: Moral Poverty Theory

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In their book *Body Count: Moral Poverty ... and How to Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs*, William J. Bennett, John J. Dilulio, Jr., and John P. Walters introduce their moral poverty theory. They define moral poverty, discuss its influence on violent crime and drugs in America, and offer solutions to the problem of moral poverty. The following sections examine the major points of moral poverty theory presented in *Body Count*.

The crime rates in the United States consistently increased from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, more important to the arguments made in *Body Count* was that there was a dramatic escalation in juvenile crime during the late 1980s and 1990s. Along with the rise in juvenile crime, there was an increase in drug use (especially crack-cocaine) and gangs. Bennett and his co-authors contend that the main cause of this increase in crime and drug use is moral poverty.

Moral poverty is defined as “the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach the young right from wrong” (p. 13). They proceed to explain that moral poverty involves being without parents, guardians, relatives, teachers, and so on that can teach children to “feel joy at others’ joy; pain at others’ pain; satisfaction when you do right; [and] remorse when you do wrong” (p. 14). According to Bennett et al., children who grow up in a situation of moral poverty lack people in their lives that can “teach these lessons by their own everyday example, and who insist that you follow suit and behave accordingly” (p. 14). They contend that the most serious [p. 83 ↓] moral poverty environments are designed to create vicious and violent street criminals.

## Moral Poverty and Its Influence on Crime and Drugs

In an article on moral poverty written for *Juvenile Crime: Opposing Viewpoints*, Dilulio notes that most people in America grow up in environments where they are taught the difference between right and wrong and are rewarded for delaying gratification and respecting other people. Dilulio argues, however, that some people are not raised in such environments but, rather, spend their childhood in moral poverty. Moral poverty

is said to begin early in a child's life. According to Dilulio, unconditional love is virtually nonexistent but abuse is commonplace. Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters argue in *Body Count* that the rise in youth violence should not come as a surprise since the number of reports of child abuse and neglect had jumped from 669,000 in 1976 to 2,989,000 in 1993. The number of incidences reported has more than quadrupled. They argue that by enforcing child abuse and neglect laws, we may be able to improve the moral poverty situation.

Moral poverty is not just created by child abuse and neglect. Bennett and his colleagues also note that children who are born out of wedlock are at a greater risk of being morally impoverished. They use this cause as an explanation of the differences in crime rates between white and African American youths. They report that, for data from 1970 to 1992, black youths consistently accounted for a larger percentage of births to unmarried mothers than white children.

Bennett and his co-authors specifically state that it is moral poverty, as opposed to economic poverty, that causes juveniles to turn to crime and drugs. They explain that this is why so many juveniles who grow up in poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods do not turn to a life of crime. These juveniles are raised in families with moral health (the opposite of moral poverty), and this insulates them from criminal influences.

In *Body Count*, Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters state that there are two characteristics that are instilled in children raised in morally impoverished environments: "lack of impulse control" and "lack of empathy" (p. 57). In his later article, Dilulio refers to these characteristics as being "radically present-oriented" and "radically self-regarding" (p. 113). In having no control over their impulses or being present-oriented, juveniles who grow up in families consumed with moral poverty have no understanding of the future and therefore they pursue activities that can allow them to obtain immediate gratification. Being self-regarding or not being able to empathize with others allows these juveniles to place no value on the lives of the people that they victimize. These characteristics are similar to elements that Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi include in their self-control theory.

The combination of these characteristics, according to the authors, increases the chances that a juvenile will give in to the temptations of crime or drugs, or both. Bennett

and his colleagues note that a large proportion of crime is related to drug and alcohol use. They state that studies have found that alcohol and drugs increase the likelihood of an individual becoming violent. Bennett et al. argue that drug use can be seen as a catalyst to crime because it causes individuals to become morally irresponsible.

## Super-Predators

Perhaps the aspect of moral poverty theory that has received the most attention is the prediction of “super-predators.” These super-predators are what the children from morally impoverished families can become. The authors predicted that the juvenile criminals to come would be much worse than before. They referred to this new breed of juveniles as super-predators. According to Bennett and his colleagues, “super-predators” are “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more pre-teenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders” (p. 27). They argue that it is growing up in a society consumed by moral poverty that has created these super-predators. They note that to these new super-predators right and wrong do not mean anything.

In *Body Count*, the authors point out that a majority of street crimes are committed by men under the age of 25. They postulate that the number of men under the age of 25 will increase significantly over the next 10 or so years. They further state that a large percentage of these young men will be raised in environments stricken by [p. 84 ↓] moral poverty, which will increase the likelihood of them becoming violent criminals. Bennett et al. also use predictions by James Q. Wilson to further their argument. Wilson estimated that the number of juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 would increase by 1 million from 1995 to 2000, half of whom would be male. Based on the finding from the Philadelphia Birth Cohort study that 6 percent of the boys in the study committed 50 percent of the crime, Wilson predicted that 6 percent (or 30,000) of these young males would become repeat offenders (Dilulio, 1997). Based on these predictions, Bennett and his colleagues refer to America as a “ticking crime bomb” (p. 21).

However, the continued dramatic rise in juvenile crime that was predicted by Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters did not occur. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention, juvenile crime did rise from the late 1980s through the mid 1990s but then decreased every year for an entire decade. The rate of juvenile arrests for violent crimes was cut nearly in half (49 percent) between 1994 and 2004. In 2005 and 2006, the number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes increased but was still lower than the number of arrests in any year during the 1990s. The prediction of juvenile super-predators also has turned out to be incorrect. According to OJJDP, juveniles have seen a greater decrease in arrest rates than adults for most crimes in the period between 1997 and 2006.

## Solutions to the Problem of Moral Poverty

Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters point out that the war against moral poverty must combat drugs (including alcohol) and crime. They assert that this war cannot be fought just in the criminal justice system, but that it must be fought in families, schools, churches, and the media.

While Bennett and his colleagues mention that cracking down on the enforcement of child abuse and neglect laws might help the moral poverty situation, the main solution that they offer for the problem is religion. In Dilulio's article, he cites that research has found the religion can help to improve many different socioeconomic problems. Dilulio also states that many people familiar with the criminal justice system have suggested to him that religion is the answer to reducing crime. It is noted that religion seems to be particularly important among black juveniles in urban areas.

Dilulio argues that for churches to help with the problem of moral poverty, public funds should be used so that local churches can become safe havens for youth living in moral poverty. Churches can also provide a number of other services for the community that may help with the problem of moral poverty. These services might include parenting classes, adoption services, day-care and pre-school programs, and substance abuse programs.

## Conclusion

In *Body Count: Moral Poverty ... and How to Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs*, Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters define their concept of moral poverty. They offer some possibilities of what causes moral poverty and some solutions to the problem. The idea and prediction of the coming of super-predators is also discussed.

Bennett and his colleagues discuss two qualities juveniles who grow up in moral poverty possess. Both of the characteristics that the authors suggest can be attributed to moral poverty, lack of impulse control and empathy, are also included in Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime as elements of self-control.

Even though the predictions made by Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters proved to be incorrect, *Body Count* was an important addition to criminological literature. Many changes in juvenile justice policy and criminal justice policy in general were motivated by the predictions made by these authors. Whether or not these policy changes were beneficial to the system has yet to be determined.

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See also

- [Akers, Ronald L.: Social Learning Theory](#)
- [Anderson, Elijah: Code of the Street](#)
- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Philadelphia Birth Cohorts, The](#)
- [Sampson, Robert J., and William Julius Wilson: Contextualized Subculture](#)
- [Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature](#)

### References and Further Readings

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