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Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles
Murray: Crime and the Bell Curve

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In 1994, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray published a controversial book called *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* that resulted in a blizzard of both bouquets and brickbats. In the 1990s, critiquing the book became a minor cottage industry for liberal academics. The data on which the analyses were done and conclusions made came from a large national longitudinal study conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor called the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY). NLSY participants are males and females of all races/ethnicities (initial $n = 12,686$) and have been interviewed regularly since 1979, but for the analyses in the book, Herrnstein and Murray limited their sample to whites.

The main point of the book is that IQ is the overall best predictor that we have of a host of social outcomes such as job and school performance, income level, unwed motherhood, welfare dependency, civility, and criminal behavior. Herrnstein and Murray also make the point that IQ tests are not biased against any race or class of people, and that intelligence is strongly heritable (genes explain much of the variance in IQ among individuals). The last two points are settled science according to the National Academy of Sciences and to the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Intelligence (Neisser et al., 1995) which was convened to provide a report on the "knowns and unknowns" of intelligence after publication of *The Bell Curve*.

The first part of the book is devoted to an overview of the concept and measurement of IQ, to demonstrating that the United States is becoming increasingly stratified by intelligence, and to describing the resulting emergence of what Herrnstein and Murray called the cognitive elite. These are individuals who, because of their high intelligence, end up in the best schools and colleges, in the best professions, and in the most powerful political positions in society. Because the United States is a meritocracy based on competition, elite social status is achieved by intelligence and effort rather than ascribed by accident of birth. It is a central tenet of population genetics that the more equal the environment (in this case meaning that the meritocratic competition is open to all) the more the outcome of the competition will depend on the genes of the competitors. Although this tenet is unassailable on scientific ground, it was galling to Herrnstein and Murray's critics.

Part three (chapters 13–17), however, generated the most controversy because it deals with IQ and race. Had Herrnstein and Murray left this section out of their book, it would have been much less controversial outside of the halls of academia, but they likely would not have sold as many books (more than 500,000). Herrnstein and Murray claim that they are “agnostic” on the origins of the consistent 15-point IQ gap between whites and blacks (and the even larger one between Asians and blacks), but they do imply that both genes and environment are probably involved. Because African Americans are greatly over-represented among individuals arrested for crimes, particularly violent crimes, and because Herrnstein and Murray implicate low IQ as a risk factor for [p. 445 ↓] crime, the IQ gap is of theoretical importance to criminology.

IQ and Criminal Behavior

As perhaps the characteristic that most distinguishes humans from other animals, intelligence has long been considered a major correlate of criminal behavior. Early criminologists tended to assume that low intelligence (often called “feeble-mindedness” by them) hampered a person's ability to calculate the ratio of pleasures and pains involved in criminal activity, and that it signaled the inability to learn and to appreciate moral norms.

However, low intelligence became unpopular as an explanation for criminal behavior after criminology was wrenched away from psychology by the new science of sociology. IQ testing itself fell into disrepute when it was reported that 37 percent of white and 89 percent of black draftees in World War I received a diagnosis of feeble-mindedness based on IQ tests then used (Vold & Bernard, 1986). This suggested that about half of the American male population was feeble-minded, an obviously absurd conclusion. This work precipitated the “cultural bias” criticism of mental tests, which along with the assumed eugenic implications of IQ testing following World War II, led to the virtual disappearance of intelligence from the criminological literature from the 1930s to the 1970s. But even during this period, a number of well-known studies continued to demonstrate a negative relationship between IQ and offending. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's study of 500 institutionalized delinquents; Marvin Wolfgang, Robert Figlio, and Thorsten Sellin's Philadelphia birth cohort study; the Joan and William McCord Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study; and D. J. West and David Farrington's longitudinal

study of London boys all found the IQ gap between offenders and nonoffenders to be between 9 and 14 points.

Hirschi and Hindelang's influential "revisionist" paper on IQ and delinquency signaled a resurgence of interest in the link between IQ and criminal behavior. Although this work was criticized by a number of criminologists, others supported Hirschi and Hindelang, claiming that IQ may have been operating all along as a "silent partner in standard sociological explanations" (Herrnstein, 1989, p. 48). This renewal of interest produced an increase in IQ studies, and more recent reviews of hundreds of studies find the IQ/crime relationship to be ubiquitous and robust.

Part two, chapter 11, simply titled *Crime*, is the section most pertinent to readers of this encyclopedia. Herrnstein and Murray begin by quoting the statement made by juvenile delinquents to Officer Krupke in *West Side Story* that they are "depraved on account of we're deprived," and go on to remark that the delinquents showed "an astute grasp of the poles of criminological theory: the psychological and the sociological" (p. 237). The sociological pole emphasizes structural factors such as poverty and unemployment, while the psychological pole emphasizes individual traits that may account for these things such as intelligence and conscientiousness. The difference in emphases may explain why sociologists were the most enthusiastic hurlers of brickbats at Herrnstein and Murray and why those most likely to present them with bouquets were psychologists.

Herrnstein and Murray acknowledge that the majority of low-IQ individuals do not commit crimes and that the large increases in crime between the 1960s and 1990s obviously cannot be attributed to changes in intelligence, "but rather must be blamed on other factors, which may have put people of low cognitive ability at greater risk than before" (p. 251). In other words, low cognitive ability is a risk factor differentially expressed in different social environments. In times when most families were intact, when there was a higher level of moral conformity, and when entry into the workforce demanded much less academic preparation, people with below-average IQs were more insulated by informal social control mechanisms from antisocial behavior. In more modern times, low-IQ individuals from single-parent homes, living in social environments in which morality is diminished, and in a society becoming increasingly complex, find it more difficult to obtain employment and are thus less socially restrained.

The NLSY data analyzed by Herrnstein and Murray found that 93 percent of the males (recall that Herrnstein and Murray purposely limited their analyses to whites) in the sample who had ever been interviewed in a correctional facility had IQs in the bottom half of the IQ distribution, and that 62 percent ever interviewed in jail or prison were from the bottom 20 percent in intelligence [p. 446 ↓] ($IQ \leq 87$) compared with 2 percent from the top 20 percent ($IQ \geq 113$); a ratio of 31:1 (p. 376). Herrnstein and Murray present many other similar ratios between the top and bottom 20 percent of the IQ distribution in chapter 16, all of which are related to criminal behavior. These include poverty (9.5:1), welfare dependency (11:1), male able-bodied unemployment (16:1), dropping out of high school (66:1), and unwed motherhood (17:1).

Herrnstein and Murray state that IQ may be related to crime and delinquency more strongly than suggested by a simple comparison of mean IQ levels of offenders and nonoffenders, usually resulting in an 8-point difference. Offenders' IQs are typically compared with the general population mean IQ of 100. It is often forgotten that the general population includes a number of offenders, as well as individuals with such low IQs that they are largely incapable of committing crimes. Thus, the difference in IQ between offenders and normally functioning nonoffenders (the mean of which is probably around 103–105) is likely to be greater than usually reported (Herrnstein, 1989).

A related problem is that many IQ studies are conducted with delinquents rather than with adult criminals. Criminologists know that almost all teenage boys commit some act which could get them into trouble with the law, and also that most delinquents do not become adult criminals (Moffitt, 1993). Criminals who offend most frequently and most seriously tend to begin prior to puberty and to continue long after the typical delinquent has desisted from offending. Delinquents who desist in early adulthood have accrued enough social capital to allow them to do so, much of that by virtue of their cognitive abilities. It has been pointed out that the IQ difference between nonoffenders and adolescent-onset offenders is typically only one IQ point, but the same comparison with life-course persistent offenders yielded a 17-point difference (Gatzke-Kopp et al, 2002; Moffitt, 1993). Simple arithmetic tells us that pooling these two very different delinquent groups (adolescent-onset and life-course persistent) hides the magnitude of the IQ difference between nonoffenders and the most persistent and serious offenders in our midst, and thus the true strength of the relationship between IQ and criminality.

Herrnstein and Murray point out that the IQ gap between offenders and nonoffenders is typically larger for verbal than for performance IQ (p. 710). This is consistent with David Wechsler's statement: "The most outstanding feature of the sociopath's test profile is the systematic high score on the performance as opposed to the verbal part of the scale" (p. 176). The concept of *intellectual imbalance*, although not well-known among sociological criminologists, is popular among correctional psychologists. A person's IQ score is rendered in terms of his or her *full-scale* IQ. Full-scale IQ is the average score obtained by summing scores on verbal (V) and performance (P) IQ and then dividing by two. Most people have V and P scores that closely match, with a population average of 100 on each subscale. People who have either V or P subscale scores significantly in excess of the other ($V > P$ or $P > V$) are considered intellectually imbalanced. Correlating full-scale IQ with offending is problematic because, as Herrnstein and Murray point out, offenders are almost always found to have significantly lower verbal IQ, but not lower performance IQ, than nonoffenders. Remarking on the relationship between $P > V$ imbalance and delinquency, Laurence Miller states: "This $PIQ > VIQ$ relationship was found across studies, despite variations in age, sex, race, setting, and form of the Wechsler scale administered, as well in differences in criteria for delinquency" (p. 120).

In the general population of American males, it has been estimated that 18 percent are $V > P$ imbalanced, 66 percent are balanced ($V = P$), and 16 percent are $P > V$ imbalanced. A discrepancy of 12 points or more is considered a significant imbalance at the .01 level (Kaufman, 1976). Researchers consistently find that $V > P$ imbalanced individuals are significantly underrepresented in criminal and delinquent populations, and that $P > V$ individuals are significantly overrepresented. $V > P$ boys are underrepresented in delinquent populations by a factor of about 2.6, and $P > V$ boys are overrepresented by a factor of about 2.2. Thus, $P > V$ boys are about five times more likely to appear in delinquent groups than are $V > P$ boys (Walsh, 2003). A $V > P$ profile would appear to be a major predictor of prosocial behavior, especially among adults given the R. Barnett et al.'s data, which show that only 0.9 percent of prison inmates had such a profile compared to the 18 percent of the general male population. Using full-scale IQ to assess the role of cognitive ability in explaining criminal behavior [p. 447 ↓] provides another example of how researchers can arrive at an incomplete picture of the nature of the relationship.

Herrnstein and Murray address the objection that perhaps normal- and high-IQ people are just as likely to break the law as low-IQ people, but only the less intelligent offenders are caught. If this is the case, low IQ is related to criminal offending only insofar as it leads to a greater probability of detection. Herrnstein and Murray admit that this idea has intuitive appeal and must at least be occasionally true, but they failed to find support for it. They state that given the millions of offenders who pass through the system and whose IQs are known, “there is barely enough crime left unaccounted for to permit such a population's [a population of above-average IQ offenders] existence” (p. 243). Another argument against the differential detection hypothesis is that the relationship between delinquency and crime is also found in self-report studies, although it is less robust than is found in studies based on official statistics. One review relevant to this issue found that 81 (89 percent) studies based on official statistics reported significant negative relationships between IQ and delinquency, while 10 reported nonsignificant findings; the corresponding figures for self-report studies were 14 (77.7 percent) and 4, respectively (Ellis & Walsh, 2000).

Terrie Moffitt and Phil Silva designed an elegant test of the differential detection hypothesis based on a large birth cohort of New Zealand males born in 1972–1973. Subjects were asked to self-report delinquent activity which was then compared with official police records. This resulted in three distinct groups: (1) self-reported delinquents with a police record, (2) self-reported delinquents with no police record, and (3) nondelinquents as assessed both by self-reports and police records. Comparing IQ scores among the groups, Moffitt and Silva found that the full-scale, verbal, and performance IQ means of groups 1 and 2 did not significantly differ from one another, meaning that undetected delinquents were no brighter than their less fortunate peers who were detected. Both groups, however, had significantly lower full-scale and VIQ means, but not lower PIQ means, than nondelinquents. The nature of the sample (a large cohort), and the ability to match self-reports with official records makes these findings compelling.

In summary, Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* was controversial because of its discussion of race and intelligence and because of its conservative policy recommendations (a discussion of either is beyond the purpose of this entry), not because of its discussion of the relationship between IQ and criminal behavior. There are many more powerful risk factors for criminal behavior other than IQ, such as low

self-control, low empathy, and high negative affect and high levels of sensation-seeking/risk-taking, although IQ is related to all these factors. Herrnstein and Murray included criminal behavior in their analysis only as another of many examples of social risk factors that accompany low cognitive ability in a world that increasingly demands high intelligence for successful adaptation.

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See also

- [Cognitive Theories of Crime](#)
- [Fishbein, Diana H.: Biosocial Theory](#)
- [Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature](#)

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