

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Left Realism Criminology

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Left realism is a main school of thought within critical criminology, and contrary to what some critics declare, it is not dead. In fact, left realism is just as important now as it was during the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher years when it was born. Left realists take crimes of the powerful (e.g., corporate crime) seriously and publish scholarly materials on this topic, but the bulk of their theoretical work addresses street crime, draconian means of policing, and violence against women in heterosexual relationships. The main reason for this is that prior to the 1980s, most critical criminologists focused primarily on corporate and white-collar crime, as well as on the influence of class and race relations on definitions of crime and the administration of justice. Left realists agree that these are important topics and warrant much more social scientific and political attention. Still, they claim and have empirically demonstrated that failing to acknowledge crimes committed by the powerless allows conservative politicians in several countries to manufacture ideological support for “law and order” policies that harm the socially and economically disenfranchised and that preclude the development of a truly egalitarian society based on social justice principles. Moreover, left realists assert that the left's ongoing failure to take working-class and female victimization seriously contributes to right-wing groups' hegemonic control over knowledge about crime and policing.

There are left realists based in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States, and Elliott Currie, John Lea, Brian MacLean, Roger Matthews, Martin Schwartz, and Jock Young are some of the most widely cited scholars in the field. Historically, though, most of the theoretical work on crime in impoverished inner-city communities was done by British realists. Furthermore, the early stages of British left realist theorizing, although clearly recognizing the criminogenic effects of capitalism and patriarchy, focused mainly on the concepts of relative deprivation and subculture. Additionally, they argued that the relation between one's position in the broader social structure and crime is mediated by subjective experiences. For example, as strain theorist Robert K. Merton pointed out decades ago, in advanced capitalist societies, many people lack the legitimate means to achieve culturally defined goals, such as cars, houses, and other symbols of material success. Some people respond to the strain [p. 547 ↓] induced by the disjunction between these goals and means by

becoming what Merton refers to as “innovators.” In other words, they deal drugs or steal from their neighbors for material gain.

Left realists also contend that people lacking legitimate means of solving the problem of relative deprivation may come into contact with other frustrated disenfranchised people and form subcultures, which, in turn, encourage and legitimate criminal behaviors. Indeed, a large body of research shows that receiving respect from peers is highly valued among ghetto adolescents who are denied status in mainstream, middle-class society. However, respect and status are often granted by inner-city subcultures when one is willing to be violent.

Some progressive scholars criticize early left realist theories for paying only lip service to gender-related issues, such as the role of broader patriarchal forces. Certainly, feminist concerns, such as violence against women, influence left realist thinking. In fact, left realists were among the first critical criminologists to recognize the importance of feminist inquiry. Still, the influence of feminism never penetrated to the deeper levels of discourse prior to the start of this century. Nevertheless, today, some North American criminologists are developing theories of woman abuse that integrate key left realist concepts with feminist concerns. For example, Walter DeKeseredy and his colleagues recently constructed a theory that combines an economic exclusion/left realist argument with a male peer support model to explain separation/divorce sexual assault in rural U.S. communities.

The square of crime is also a major component of British left realist theoretical offerings. The square of crime focuses on four interacting elements: victim, offender, state agencies (e.g., the police), and the public. Some readers might argue that since the square of crime is a dated contribution and that left realism has historically focused almost exclusively on inner-city street crime, it has little, if any relevance, to a critical criminological understanding of current criminal activities and societal reactions in rural communities. Of course, this is an issue that can only be addressed empirically, given that, at the time of writing this entry, no one has yet tested hypotheses derived from the square of crime in rural areas and small towns. However, in their attempt to start the development of a rural critical criminology, Joseph Donnermeyer and Walter DeKeseredy contend that unlike the earlier Chicago School of criminology, the

square of crime does not have an intrinsic urban bias and, instead, represents a way to understand the fundamental dimensions of crime at multiple levels.

Left realists and other progressive criminologists claim that social and physical disorders do not always need to be dealt with by a massive police presence. True, many disenfranchised inner-city residents view police “crackdowns” on public drinking, panhandling, and other minor offenses as grossly unfair with regard to the seriousness of these offenses and the degree to which the police monitor some sections of the city instead of others. Left realists in both North America and the United Kingdom theorize that “hard” police tactics, such as stopping and searching people who are publicly drunk, only serve to alienate socially, economically, and politically excluded urban communities. These tactics, it is also asserted, influence many people to withhold support and information the police need to solve crimes that are more serious. In turn, the police respond with more aggressive tactics, which lead to further community alienation from the police.

Since its birth in the early 1970s, critical criminology has contributed to a rich interdisciplinary understanding of how various forms of inequality spawned by brutal macro-level forces, such as capitalism and patriarchy, contribute to a wide range of harms, including woman abuse, racist police practices, corporate crimes, and acts of predatory street violence committed by socially and economically disadvantaged youth. However, relatively little critical work has focused on how structural factors such as the shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy and the neo-conservative assault on limited social services has negatively affected today's middle-class youth. In his 2004 book *The Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture and the Crisis of Adolescence*, U.S. left realist Elliott Currie helps fill yet another major gap in the criminological literature and offers an empirically informed theory of juvenile troubles that emphasizes the role of modern social Darwinist culture. Further, like rural work done by DeKeseredy and his colleagues, Currie's research, theory, and policy proposals demonstrate [p. 548 ↓] that left realism's contributions are not limited to addressing the plight of poor people in urban centers of concentrated disadvantage.

In sum, then, left realists construct and test theories about a number of key problems facing contemporary society. Still, left realism is not just a theoretical enterprise. For example, left realists conduct local crime victimization surveys, which include

quantitative and qualitative questions that elicit data on harms generally considered irrelevant to the police, conservative politicians, and most middle- and upper-class members of the general public. These topics include male-to-female physical and sexual assaults in adult intimate relationships; sexual harassment and the verbal harassment of gays, lesbians, and people of color in public places; and corporate crime. Even when government agencies decide to gather statistics on one or more of these topics, left realists typically elicit higher incidence and prevalence rates because they define criminal harms more broadly and in ways that more accurately reflect the pain and suffering caused by them.

Mainstream government surveys, such as the U.S. National Crime Victimization Survey, typically ignore the plight of “nontraditional populations” and their voices are rarely heard, which, in turn, results in limited government resources being devoted to alleviate significant harms. Note, too, that although national surveys are claimed to be antithetical to the main objectives of left realism, some North American critical criminologists, such as DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz, have conducted a Canadian national survey of woman abuse heavily influenced by left realist discourse that generated incidence and prevalence rates markedly higher than those obtained by national victimization surveys conducted by federal government agencies based in Canada and the United States.

Some progressives raise concerns about government-sponsored research and see it as a social control science that is used to serve the interests of politicians and others seeking more punitive means of dealing with crime. This point is well taken, given that much government-funded mainstream criminological research helps achieve this goal. Nevertheless, a few left realists receive government funding for some of their empirical work and produce results that challenge the status quo. There is even evidence that government-sponsored left realist surveys occasionally make a difference. For example, a Canadian local survey of corporate violence against Punjabi farm workers and their children conducted in the early 1990s influenced a university based in British Columbia and the British Columbia government to provide suitable and affordable childcare for Punjabi farm workers.

Although best known for doing local victimization surveys in inner-city communities, some left realists examine the plight of rural women abused by their current or former male partners, and this work involves using primarily qualitative methods such as

in-depth semi-structured interviews. For example, at the start of this millennium, DeKeseredy and his colleagues conducted a study of separation/divorce sexual assault in three rural Ohio communities. They uncovered that sizable portions of rural men have patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, and they also have male peers who view wife beating, sexual assault, and many other types of woman abuse as legitimate and effective means of responding to real or perceived threats to their masculinity. These researchers also found that collective efficacy can take different shapes and forms, and definitions of the “common good” of a neighborhood may vary among residents in different contexts or situations. What are perceived as indicators of the common good may actually be behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that threaten the safety of women seeking freedom from abusive male partners.

Although left realists study and theorize crime and social control, they also offer many different progressive crime control and prevention policies. Still, all left realists have two things in common. First, while they would all like to see a major transformation from a society based on class, race/ethnic, and gender inequality to one that is truly equitable and democratic, they realize that this will not happen in the immediate future. This view is well-founded, given that historically, there has been massive public support for neo-conservative governments and their economic and social policies, such as government cuts to health care and unemployment insurance. Thus, left realists seek short-term gains while remaining committed to long-term change. This is why they propose practical initiatives that can be implemented immediately and that “chip away” at patriarchal capitalism.

North American left realists devote more attention to anticrime proposals than those based in the [p. 549 ↓] United Kingdom and elsewhere. Thus far, the bulk of British left realist policies focus on criminal justice reforms, including democratic control of policing. These initiatives are subject to sharp criticisms from other groups of critical criminologists. For example, some progressives criticize British realists’ failure to address the power of police subcultures and accuse them of accommodating the government’s repressive crime control strategies. This is, perhaps, an unfair criticism, given that every advanced industrial society requires a combination of fair and equitable informal and formal processes of social control. Therefore, left realists argue that it is inappropriate to totally ignore criminal justice reforms for fear that they will only serve to maintain the status quo.

All left realists, however, argue that criminal justice reforms should not be substitutes for socialist and feminist initiatives. In fact, it is an important argument of North American left realists that those who assume that the criminal justice system is solely responsible for dealing with crime and that other government agencies should manage the social, economic, or family problems that cause it do not consider how decisions on economic issues (e.g., factory closures) may significantly influence the rate of predatory street crime and violence against women. Consequently, according to U.S. left realist Elliott Currie, the failure to make the proper connections between the key causes and consequences precludes the development of effective policies to prevent crime. This failure also places an unnecessary burden on the criminal justice system, which is constantly required to try to fix the damage done by broader social, political, and economic forces.

North American realists are sensitive to these concerns. For example, to curb various types of interpersonal crimes in both rural and urban communities, they call for minimal policing as well as a higher minimum wage, quality jobs, housing subsidies, and affordable government-sponsored child care. Working with the media to make issues of central importance to critical criminologists very visible is another strategy frequently used by left realists. Some left realists also frequently use profeminist men's strategies aimed at curbing violence against women. There are variations in the profeminist men's movement, but a general point of agreement is that men must take an active role in stopping woman abuse and eliminating other forms of patriarchal and social domination throughout society. Some examples of short-term profeminist men's strategies incorporated into a left realist agenda are protesting and boycotting pornographic media and strip clubs, confronting men who make sexist jokes and who abuse their female partners, and supporting and participating in woman abuse awareness programs.

Left realists do not neglect the crimes of the powerful. In fact, they argue that offenses such as price-fixing, creating unsafe workplaces, and the like may affect poor people in the same way as middle-class citizens, or it may affect them more. Moreover, British left realists John Lea and Jock Young assert that the more vulnerable a person is politically and economically, the more likely it is that a person will be victimized from all directions—by corporate and white-collar crime, street crime, unemployment and poverty, and a host of other social problems.

To curb corporate crime, left realists call for policies such as the democratization of corporations, the organization of citizen patrols based on democratic principles, and more formal mechanisms to ensure that regulatory laws are strictly enforced. Yet, there is no question that left realists pay far more attention to inner-city street crime and woman abuse.

While left realism may not be as popular in critical criminological circles as it was in the 1980s and early 1990s, it is still at the forefront of an unknown number of progressive criminologists' minds. Many scholars continue to review this school of thought in undergraduate texts and in scholarly books and journals, and some rural critical criminological work is now heavily influenced by key left realist principles. Consider, too, that left realism is still the subject of sharp attacks from both left-wing and right-wing criminologists. Obviously, then, left realism continues to be granted some importance by the international criminological community.

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See also

- [Currie, Elliott: The Market Society and Crime](#)
- [Inequality and Crime](#)
- [Taylor, Ian, Paul Walton, and Jock Young: The New Criminology](#)

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