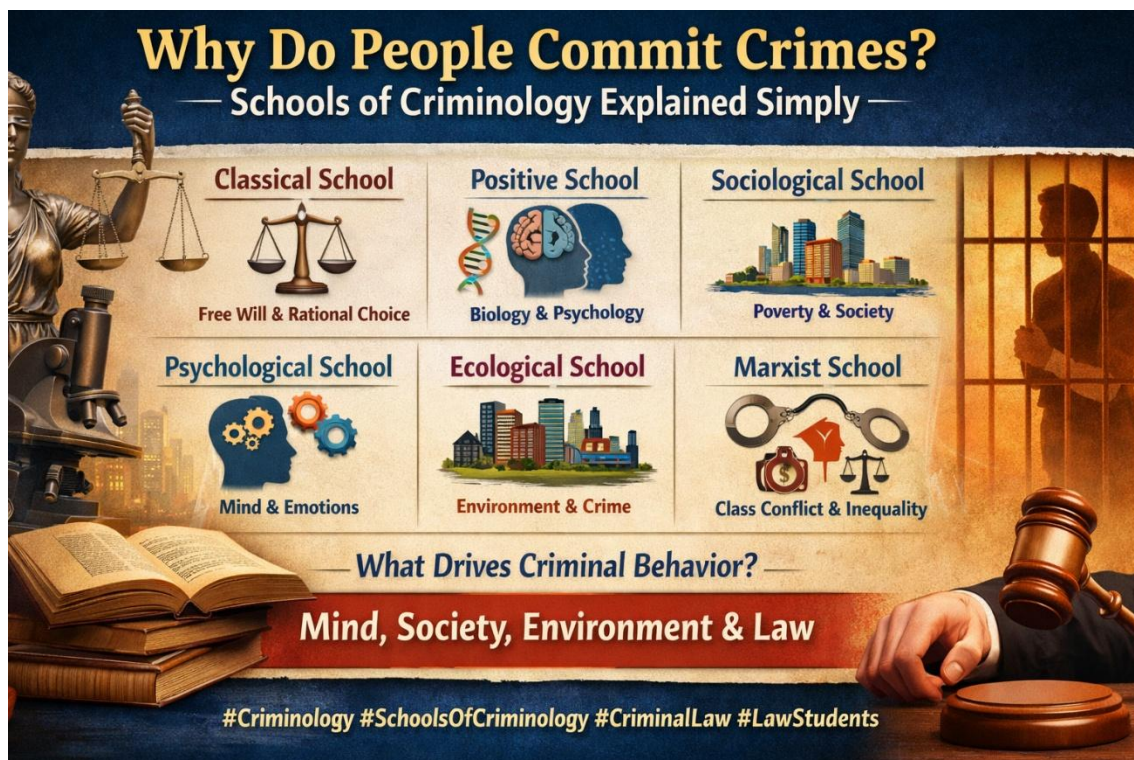


Why Do People Commit Crimes? Schools of Criminology Explained

Introduction

One of the first and most fundamental questions a law student encounters in **Criminology** is: **Why do people commit crimes?**

Is crime a result of *free will, poverty, biology, society, or psychological factors*? Over the years, criminologists have tried to answer this question through different **Schools of Criminology**. Each school provides a distinct explanation of criminal behaviour and has influenced criminal law, punishment, and prison reforms.



For law professionals, understanding these schools is essential—not just for exams, but also to grasp how modern criminal justice systems function. This blog explains the major schools of criminology in **simple, exam-friendly language**, with relevant case laws.

1. Classical School of Criminology – Crime as Free Will

Core Idea

The **Classical School** believes that:

- Humans are **rational beings**
- People commit crimes after **weighing pleasure against pain**
- Crime is a result of **free will**, not compulsion

If punishment is **swift, certain, and proportionate**, crime can be prevented.

Key Thinkers

- **Cesare Beccaria**
- **Jeremy Bentham**

Impact on Criminal Law

- Emphasis on **rule of law**
- Equality before law
- Fixed and proportionate punishment
- Opposition to arbitrary punishment

Case Law Reference

- **State of Punjab v. Prem Sagar (2008)**

The Supreme Court stressed proportionality in sentencing, reflecting classical principles that punishment should fit the crime. This case dealt with sentencing guidelines, illustrating proportionality in punishment consistent with Classical principles.

Criticism

- Ignores poverty, mental illness, and social inequality
- Assumes everyone has equal capacity to choose

2. Positive (Positivist) School – Crime as a Result of Factors Beyond Control

Core Idea

The **Positive School** argues that crime is determined by biological, psychological, and social factors; **Lombroso** argued some are ‘born criminals’ with *atavistic traits*., but are influenced by:

- Biological factors
- Psychological conditions
- Social environment

Crime is **determined**, not freely chosen.

Branches of Positivist School

(a) Biological Theory

- Proposed by **Cesare Lombroso**
- Criminals are “born criminals” with physical traits

⚠ This theory is largely rejected today but historically important.

(b) Psychological Theory

- Crime may result from:
 - Mental illness
 - Personality disorders
 - Emotional imbalance

(c) Sociological Theory

- Crime is caused by:
 - Poverty
 - Unemployment
 - Broken families
 - Poor education

Case Law Reference

- **Ratan Lal v. State of Punjab (1965)**

The Supreme Court emphasized **reformatory justice**, especially for young offenders,

reflecting positivist thinking. The Court emphasized reformatory justice for juveniles, reflecting positivist concern with rehabilitation rather than deterrence.

Contribution

- Probation
- Parole
- Juvenile justice system
- Reformatory punishment

3. Sociological School – Crime as a Social Phenomenon

Core Idea

The **Sociological School** views crime as a product of **society itself**.

If society fails to provide equal opportunities, crime becomes inevitable.

Key Thinker

- **Émile Durkheim**

Durkheim argued that:

- Crime is **normal** in every society
- Complete absence of crime is impossible
- Crime helps society evolve by challenging outdated norms

Other contributors include **Robert Merton (strain theory)** and **Chicago School theorists (social disorganization)**, who explained crime through inequality, blocked opportunities, and community breakdown.

Case Law Reference

- **Mohd. Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1977)**

The Supreme Court observed that crime is often a “pathological aberration” caused by social failure, not individual wickedness. The Court described crime as a “pathological aberration,” aligning with reformatory ideals though not directly citing Durkheim.

Relevance in India

- High crime rates linked to:
 - Urban slums
 - Caste discrimination
 - Economic inequality

4. Psychological School – Crime and the Human Mind

Core Idea

This school focuses on the **mental state** of the offender.

Crime may result from:

- Frustration
- Aggression
- Childhood trauma
- Lack of emotional control

Key Thinkers

- Sigmund Freud (psychoanalytic theory)

Legal Application

- Insanity defence
- Diminished responsibility

Case Law Reference

- **Dahyabhai Chhaganbhai Thakkar v. State of Gujarat (1964)**
The Supreme Court clarified the burden of proof under the insanity defence (Section 84 IPC).

5. Ecological and Environmental School – Crime and Surroundings

Core Idea

This school links crime to:

- Poor housing
- Overcrowding

- Pollution
- Lack of recreational spaces

An unhealthy environment breeds frustration and crime.

Relevance Today

- Urban crimes
- Juvenile delinquency in slum areas

6. Marxist / Conflict School – Crime and Power Structure

Core Idea

Crime is a result of **economic inequality** and **class conflict**.

According to this school:

- Laws are made by the powerful
- Poor are punished more harshly
- White-collar crimes often go unnoticed

Case Law Reference

- **State of Gujarat v. Mohanlal Jitmalji Porwal (1987)**

The Supreme Court acknowledged the serious societal impact of economic offences.

The Court highlighted the gravity of economic offences, which resonates with Marxist critiques of unequal enforcement.

7. Modern Integrated Approach – A Balanced View

Modern criminology does not rely on one school alone. Instead, it adopts an **integrated approach**, considering:

- Individual psychology
- Social background
- Economic conditions
- Legal deterrence

Case Law Reference

- **Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab (1980)**

The “rarest of rare” doctrine reflects a balanced approach between deterrence and reform.

Conclusion

There is **no single answer** to why people commit crimes. Criminology teaches us that crime is a complex interaction of **mind, society, environment, and law**.

For law students, understanding the **Schools of Criminology** helps:

- Analyse criminal behaviour
- Appreciate sentencing principles
- Support reformative justice
- Apply theory to real cases

Each school offers partial insight; modern criminology integrates these perspectives to explain crime comprehensively. Ultimately, a humane and effective criminal justice system must **understand the criminal before condemning the crime**.

References / Case Laws

1. State of Punjab v. Prem Sagar, (2008) 7 SCC 550
2. Ratan Lal v. State of Punjab, AIR 1965 SC 444
3. Mohd. Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh, (1977) 3 SCC 287
4. Dahyabhai Chhaganbhai Thakkar v. State of Gujarat, AIR 1964 SC 1563
5. State of Gujarat v. Mohanlal Jitmalji Porwal, (1987) 2 SCC 364
6. Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab, (1980) 2 SCC 684

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