EIGHT FALLACIES ABOUT CRIME

I don’t believe in grand theory. Instead this book is built on a “middle range theory” that does not try to cover all human misbehavior on a very general level. Instead I offer you a practical understanding of crime and its prevention, organizing information so it will be easy to learn and remember.

That requires controlling our emotions. We are all angered when we learn of suffering crime victims, people wrongly convicted of crimes, or people who destroy their own lives or those of others. But we cannot let our natural emotions prevent us from examining all the facts and thinking clearly about crime.

I have developed the routine activity approach as a middle-range theory to help you study crime without getting lost. It is very practical for policy, too, for it treats the criminal act as a tangible event occurring within the physical world. The routine activity approach focuses on exactly how, when, and where crime occurs. In this book I hope to teach you something about crime you do not know already. First, I ask you, as the reader, to overcome these eight fallacies about crime:

1. Dramatic fallacy
2. Cops-and-courts fallacy
3. Not-me fallacy
4. Innocent-youth fallacy
5. Ingenuity fallacy
6. Organized-crime fallacy
7. Big gang fallacy
8. Agenda fallacy
These fallacies keep coming back again and again via the media and in unusual stories people tell that misrepresent what normally happens with crime. A Chicago home is burgled. The owner calls police, expecting them to show up with a crime-scene team and to go find the burglar. In reality, big-city police may not show up at all for an ordinary burglary! Or they might arrive after the burglar has been gone for some time. If the victim demands a full investigation, the officer might declare, “Lady, you’ve been watching too much television.”

On television big crimes have big investigations, but that does not represent real life. This book is about crime as it really happens. My challenge to you is not only to learn these fallacies, but to fortify yourself with them and withstand the daily bombardment of dramatic misinformation about crime.

THE DRAMATIC FALLACY

Note that I call my middle-range theory “the routine activity approach.” I work very hard to avoid being distracted by dramatic crimes. One semester a student came to me before the first class and asked, “Is this about serial murderers?” and I told her no—this class will emphasize ordinary thefts and fights. She dropped the course. Are you willing to learn about most crime as it really occurs?

Dramatic crimes get more attention because they make a better story. News media know that perfectly well. In fact, plenty of people make money talking about nonrepresentative crime. Included are 24-hour news cable channels that compete with the networks for viewers—CNN, Fox, C-SPAN, and MSNBC—plus many specialized cable channels, such as TNT, A&E, HBO, TBS, and Spike TV.

Even before cable news existed, television and other media would seek strange and violent incidents to keep their ratings high. The media are interested in romantic murders by jealous lovers, shootouts between felons and police officers, and extreme or clever types of murder—whether the events were true or made up for movies or fictional series.

Yet most criminal acts are not very clever or romantic. The dramatic fallacy states that the most publicized offenses are very distant from real life. The media are carried away by a horror-distortion sequence. They find a horror story and then entertain the public with it. They make money on it while
creating a myth in the public mind. Then they build on that myth for the next horror story. As this happens, public misinformation grows, with new stories building on public acceptance of past misconceptions. Thus crime becomes very distorted in the public mind (see Beckett & Sasson, 2004).

These distortions can produce a “moral panic” as stories accumulate and make people increasingly scared—even though the incidents in question are exceedingly rare. I am not denying that horrible incidents occur, and those nearby suffer greatly. But millions of people at great distance suffer vicariously via the news reports, forgetting that their greatest local horrors are likely to come from ordinary car accidents, heart attacks, and strokes that don’t even get in the news.

No crime is more distorted in the public eye than murder. The most interesting or elaborate murders are covered. Even worse, much of the public responds as if murder is one of the most frequent crimes. Let’s consider the reality based on the Uniform Crime Report (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2013b; see Exhibit 1.1).

A simple calculation shows that major violent crimes outnumber the murder category 80 to 1. Total major property crimes outnumber murder by a ratio of 625 to 1. The millions and millions of other crimes outnumber murder by perhaps 10,000 to 1. Clearly the media emphasis on murder is misplaced.

Nor is the coverage of murder circumstances at all accurate. Sherlock Holmes would have no interest whatever in most of these 14,827 murders. Only 12 people were poisoned. Only 8 died of explosives. Only 4 were pushed out a window. Some 35 were killed with narcotics, 13 drowned, and 89 strangled. Two-thirds died of gunshots, but most of the guns were handguns, not assault weapons. There was one sniper death. Just six of the reported murders involved gambling, prostitution, or commercial vice (FBI, 2013b).

### Exhibit 1.1  Murder Is a Tiny Part of the Crime Volume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder and non-negligent manslaughter</td>
<td>14,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total major violent crimes</td>
<td>1,214,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total major property crimes</td>
<td>8,975,438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous other crimes in police records</td>
<td>Millions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other crimes not leading to arrest (based on other data sources)</td>
<td>Millions and millions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most murders are the tragic result of a stupid little quarrel. Indeed, murder is less a crime than it is an outcome. The path toward murder is not much different from that of an ordinary fight, except that, unfortunately, someone happened to die. Murder has two central features: a gun too near and a hospital too far. My brother, Richard Felson (2004, 2013), has written by far the best work explaining how violence emerges from simple disputes. Although some murderers intend to kill from the outset, even they usually have simple reasons not worth televising. More commonly, someone harming someone else does not really know where that harm will lead.

Despite these dramatic exceptions, harm is limited in the vast majority of incidents. Most quarrels do not lead to threats. Most threats do not lead to blows. Most blows do minor physical harm. Most physical harm requires no hospitalization. Most hospitalization is brief and only rarely does it lead to death. This picture is well supported by the National Crime Victim Survey. For example, there are more than four times as many simple assaults as aggravated assaults (Truman & Langton, 2014). Although there is no national repository of calls for police service or 9-1-1 calls, the arithmetic for almost any local police department points to the same conclusion: that disturbances and disputes far exceed in number the actual assaults requiring an arrest, and even these may involve no physical injury whatever.

However, that does not mean people are not upset by quarrels or other small events. Of course we would like a society in which nobody gets mad at anybody else. But we should not interpret murder as our indicator. I am constantly shocked that people use homicide statistics as the measure of overall crime!

The dominance of minor problems is repeatedly verified by the statistics. Property-crime victimizations far exceed violent victimizations. The simplest thefts and burglaries are the most common offenses, and far exceed major thefts of large amounts. Self-report surveys pick up a lot of illegal consumption and minor offenses, but little major crime. The ongoing Monitoring the Future Survey repeatedly asks high school seniors about their use of various drugs (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014). Respondents admit to considerable underage drinking, minor theft, and plenty of marijuana experimentation; only a small percentage report using cocaine or hard drugs.

Alcohol abuse remains the major issue! It is also likely that illegal experimentation is sporadic rather than regular. When students are asked about drug use in the past 30 days, these numbers fall to much lower levels.
Eight Fallacies About Crime

(Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2007), and most do not break the rules every day. This principle holds strong: Minor drugs far exceed major drugs, and occasional usage far exceeds regular usage. These drugs do much less overall harm than simple alcohol abuse—always the greatest American drug problem. Misunderstanding the problem has consequences, since it leads the public and its representatives to pick the wrong policies.

You can see, then, that most offenses are not dramatic. Property crime far exceeds violent crime. Violent crimes that do occur are relatively infrequent and leave no long-term physical harm. When injury does result, it is usually self-containing and not classified as aggravated assault, much less homicide. Real crime is usually not much of a story: Someone drinks too much and gets in a fight. There is no inner conflict, thrilling car chase, or life-and-death struggle. He saw, he took, and he left. He won’t give it back.

Of course dramatic events sometimes occur in real life. By the time this book is in your hands, another intruder may shoot up a school, and people will then talk about that one event as if it represented all crime. Keep your focus on the plain facts of crime and ignore the dramatic event of the month.

THE COPS-AND-COURTS FALLACY

Many of my students are in law enforcement, and I appreciate their role. But they are not the center of the crime universe. Police, courts, and prisons are important after crimes have entered the public sphere, but they are not the key actors in crime production or prevention. Crime comes first, and the justice system sometimes finds out and acts upon it. The cops-and-courts fallacy warns us against overrating the power of criminal justice agencies, including police, prosecutors, and courts.

Police Work

Real police work is by and large mundane. Ordinary police activity includes driving around a lot, asking people to quiet down, hearing complaints about barking dogs, filling out paperwork, meeting with other police officers, and waiting to be called up in court. If you ever become a crime analyst, you will quickly learn that:
Many calls for service never lead to a real crime report. Many complaints (e.g., barking dogs) bother a few citizens, but do not directly threaten the whole community. Many problems are resolved informally, as they should be.

The old line is that, “Police work consists of hour upon hour of boredom, occasionally interrupted by moments of sheer terror.” But most officers don’t experience or deliver that much terror. The vast majority of the 700,000 law enforcement officers in the United States (92%) never experienced any assault during the year 2012. Of those assaulted, one in four was injured, but only 48 died from attack by felons—equal to the number dying by accident (FBI, 2013a). These deaths are very upsetting to other officers and the public. However, the annual risk of dying on duty is only .0000685 or about 7 per 100,000 officers. Such deaths make good television because they are so rare and hence dramatic!

Only a few hundred civilians per year are shot dead by law enforcement personnel. Some police officers have to wait years for moments like those seen on TV. Most seldom—or never—take a gun out of its holster. Most are never shot at and never shoot at anybody else. Only a tiny portion of homicides in the United States are at the hands of police. So what’s really happening?

Police are society’s agents of daily confrontation. Drunks on the street? Barking dogs? Loud parties at night? Teens hanging around? Couple arguing? Call the cops. Their job is to close down the beer keg just when the party is getting good.

In these encounters, rude behavior can go in many directions: civilians toward civilians; civilians toward cops; cops toward civilians. Police see a lot of rude behavior and hear a lot of rude language, some of it directed at them. Most rudeness does not escalate. But sometimes it does. Police use of force usually amounts to a bit of a shove, or moving the arms behind the back when cuffing someone. Sometimes an offender shoves back, but knives and guns are exceptional in most cities for most police.

To understand policing, understand that most crimes are not reported to the police in the first place. As I noted, police are called more often to deal with barking dogs and loud parties than they are asked to stop a major felony. They handle most events informally with no violence and no arrests.

Police do not even know about most crimes that occur during the year. In the 2013 National Crime Victim Survey, only 46 percent of those who said they were victimized by violence also said they had reported the crime to the police.
(Truman & Langton, 2014). Self-report studies cited earlier in this chapter turn up even greater numbers of illegal acts that never are reported to police, notably many millions of instances of marijuana consumption, underage alcohol use, shoplifting, private assaults, and billions of dollars’ worth of fraud that businesses and citizens leave unreported.

Average citizens often demand more “police presence” in their neighborhood. But they really don’t understand their own situation. The theory is that police can reduce crime by patrolling—inhibiting wrongdoing by their sheer presence on the streets. The Kansas City Patrol Experiment investigated this point. The experiment discovered that intensified police patrols are scarcely noticed by offenders or citizens and have no impact on crime rates (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974). More recent work finds that police can reduce crime, but only if they concentrate police efforts very intelligently (Weisburd & Eck, 2004). Given 300 million people and billions of valuable items dispersed over vast space, there is no practical way for police to deliver blanket protection. Like all of us, the police have to focus their efforts to become more effective.

I live in Austin, Texas, which has 2,300 sworn officers attempting to control crime for

- 840,000 residential population, spread over
- about 350,000 housing units, and
- almost 300 square miles of land.

Perfect 24-hour coverage of every housing unit would require 350,000 multiplied by 24 hours, or 8.4 million person-hours of work. That means that each officer would have to work over 3,600 hours a day! This explains why mass police protection is simply not possible.

Do you really expect police to know that the guy that just left your house is a burglar? Most burglaries proceed with nobody getting caught; when somebody is caught, that’s not because the police are there when it happened. Less than 1 percent of offenses end with the offender apprehended in the act by police on patrol. Doubling the number of police in a US city is doubling a drop in the bucket.

**Courts and Punishment**

For most crimes known to the police, nobody gets arrested. When there is an arrest, most cases are never sent to the prosecutor. Of the cases that go up, most lead to plea bargaining between attorney and prosecutor, not a trial.
Of those that go to trial, bench trials in local police court is much more likely than a full-blown jury trial, as seen on TV. Even people convicted are very likely to avoid incarceration, despite several decades of “law and order” politics. For example, about 3 million household burglaries were estimated in the United States in 2013 (Truman & Langton, 2014). Of these, about half of the incidents were reported to the police. About 1 in 10 resulted in arrests. Only about 1 percent of burglaries lead to a conviction, and fewer still to incarceration. The chance of being punished for a drug offense is much smaller, still.

Within the court setting, very few convictions are based on trials as seen on TV. Most are plea-bargained in meetings between prosecutor and defense attorney, and only about 1 in 50 cases go before a jury. When the criminal justice system delivers punishment, it does so after long delays, typically 6 to 8 months.

That delay is very important for crime policy. People expect way too much deterrence from punishment by the justice system. Psychologists have found that the best way to get someone to do what you want is to reward more than you punish, doing so quickly, often, and mildly. The US criminal justice system does everything wrong:

- It punishes bad rather than rewarding good.
- It penalizes people rarely and sporadically.
- It delivers its decisions and penalties after long delays.

People inside the justice system often find this very frustrating, so when they can finally convict someone they often want to “throw the book” at him. However, extreme penalties delivered late and sporadically have little practical impact. And, remember, they can only be delivered when a crime is known and after an arrest is made.

In contrast, crime itself offers sure and quick rewards to offenders. Don’t be surprised that many people continue to commit crimes.

Consider what happens when you touch a hot stove: The pain you receive is quick, certain, sharp, but usually not long lasting. After being burned once, you will not touch a hot stove again. Now think of an imaginary hot stove that burns you only once every 500 times you touch it, with the burn not hurting until six months later. The other 499 times you receive a quick reward. Psychological research and common sense alike tell us a justice system will not work very well if it follows this principle.
My point is not to blame the people in the criminal justice system. They are subject to practical limits just like everyone else. Keep in mind the practical realities for the justice system, and don’t expect too much from the clean-up squad.

THE NOT-ME FALLACY

My brother Rich is an outstanding social psychologist, who has shown that social psychological theory and research are highly relevant to crime analysis. 

Attribution is an important principle in social psychology. People tend to forgive their own misdeeds, but not the misdeeds of strangers. They tend to explain away their own misdeeds as situational: “I drank too much at the party because my friends were there.” “I had no other way to get home but to drive, and I only had a few drinks.” “I wasn’t really going that fast considering that there was no traffic.” “I didn’t have time to find a condom.”

On the other hand, people tend to be harsher and more personal in explaining the misdeeds of strangers: “That guy’s irresponsible.” “Good girls don’t do that.” “What do you expect of people who live on that side of town?” Note the contradiction: The same deeds are excused for me and my people, even though I blame outsiders for doing the very same thing.

The not-me fallacy is the tendency to think that crime does not apply to me or people in my world, but rather to outsiders. It is consistent with attribution theory, explaining why hypocrisy is so common when people discuss crime.

People tend to hold others, especially strangers, to higher standards than they hold themselves. It is perfectly normal to deny one’s own bad deeds or to find situational alibis. Thus people distance moral wrong away from themselves—but are less charitable to people they don’t know or don’t like. Attribution theory helps us understand why people can participate in crime without labelling themselves as criminals. It also helps explain why white Americans, who consume marijuana about as much as blacks, attribute drug abuse mainly to Americans with darker skins. As juveniles get older and break more roles, they begin to recode their infractions as “minor,” to becoming more accepting of their own rule-breaking and that of their friends. Even adults find ways to justify crimes in their own areas, while disparaging the other side of the tracks.
The old cowboy movies had good guys (in white hats with white horses) and bad guys (in black hats with black horses). Indeed, empirical research has virtually destroyed the claim that victims and offenders come from separate populations. You don’t have to be bad to do bad. Many people who usually observe the rules may break them from time to time.

If you follow society’s rules most of the time, you can conveniently forget your own exceptions. If you commit a few crimes, you can remind yourself of the many you have not committed. If you skip a temptation out of fear, you can persuade yourself that you are morally superior to somebody else.

Or perhaps you never had a chance to break a rule. M. Felson and Gottfredson (1984) found that women’s lack of sexual experience early in the 20th century reflected mainly the fact that nobody ever tried. Young women were closely watched by parents and could not easily be alone with a young man. But the vast majority of those women who gained that opportunity proceeded with sexual explorations natural to the species.

Once you know the not-me fallacy, you should remember that active offenders are not that different from the rest of the population. Not only is some offending normal, but offenders themselves have extremely high rates of victimization (Fattah, 1991; M. Gottfredson, 1984). Thus, offenders are often victimized by other offenders, while many victims are really not entirely innocent.

Most people violate at least some laws sometimes. That’s why it is so misleading to use such terms as “the bad guys,” “the super-predators,” or “criminal man.” Although overactive offenders exist, they are only part of the picture. We should not credit overactive offenders for all or most crime. Nor should we treat crime motivation as exclusive, since we all have reasons to be tempted.

In 1943, Professor Austin Porterfield gave the same self-report survey designed for the local juvenile delinquents to his own students at Texas Christian University. He learned that the two groups had rather similar delinquency levels. (I return to this work in Chapter 6.) That finding has been strengthened by many self-report studies over many decades. It hardly makes sense to divide the world into good guys and bad guys.

Even more extreme are the studies of sexual fantasies and daydreaming. Several researchers have given the same fantasy questionnaire to sex offenders and college students. Common and frequent fantasies among college students include having sex in public places, sadomasochism, forbidden partners,
group sex, and a variety of illegal behaviors (Byers et al., 1998; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). A human population appears to contain much greater potential for sexual rule-breaking than sex-offending data indicate.

In sum, the general public tends to attribute criminal personalities and tendencies to outsiders, while fancying themselves as above the fray. Their own infractions are recoded in their minds as situational responses or exceptional behaviors. This allows them to divide the world into good guys and bad guys, while assigning themselves, their family, and friends to the first group.

THE INNOCENT-YOUTH FALLACY

The television version of crime often portrays middle-aged offenders. When the young are there, they are usually presented as innocents corrupted by those older. This reflects the innocent-youth fallacy, the belief that being young means being innocent.

Are young people really so innocent? Do they really need to be corrupted by adults, or by a foul environment? I have my doubts.

Criminal behavior accelerates quickly in teenage years, peaks in the late teens or early 20s, and declines as youth fades. This has been found in many different data sets, various nations, and numerous eras for which data are available (M. Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2000). How could youths be innocent when their relative level of crime participation is so high?

Mischief begins well before the teenage crime period. Archer and Coyne (2005) review a vast literature, taking into account early aggression by normal children. That aggression includes pushing, shoving, and hitting, but also a variety of overt nonviolent attacks. Researchers have used all kinds of clever devices, including cameras and audio transmitters on playgrounds and during classroom breaks—when teachers were out of sight. They also asked victims for reports on verbal and other aggression. Early childhood includes personal rejections of others (“I’m not your friend”). Young kids also cover their ears or refuse to listen when mad, or threaten to exclude others from playgroups or parties. Middle childhood is a bit more sophisticated, spreading rumors, using gossip, backbiting, breaking confidences, criticizing clothes, silent treatment, and various forms of ostracism, group exclusion, recruitment of others against the victim, or embarrassing in public or through abusive communications or
practical jokes. In addition, a variety of aggressive and troublesome behaviors occur within classrooms, including disobedience and circumventing adult authority.

I have long believed that our famous “age curve” is misleading, because it implies early innocence. In fact, omission from official statistics does not prove that bad behavior was absent at earlier years. Bad behavior before puberty is handled **informally** by teachers and parents behind the scenes, not usually becoming a public issue. Indeed, legal systems declare young children to be incapable of official crime, and even children past that age are often handled informally. Six-year-olds don’t usually have the muscles to do enough harm, and their teachers and parents are much bigger and stronger.

With puberty comes greater size and muscularity, along with sexual capacities. Society can no longer treat misbehaviors entirely on an informal basis, and problems begin to spill into the public sphere. I do not deny the adolescent acceleration in crime and delinquency, but the notion of pre-adolescent innocence is just plain wrong.

In sum, teenage years bring much more misbehavior than earlier years, but it also makes that behavior more consequential. That forces the adult world to do something. Misbehavior begins to enter our statistical flow during adolescence, but that does not prove the prior years to have been innocent.

Nor does it appear that youths are most often corrupted by bad adults. Indeed, most youths are corrupted by other youths. Albert Reiss’s (1988) classic review of the co-offending literature makes it clear that delinquency is largely carried out by small groups, usually very close in age. The corruption process is not just a question of a few bad apples or instigators. Rather, it is a process in which youths together have mutual bad influence—as discussed and explained in Chapter 6.

Strangely enough, the innocent-youth fallacy persists after offenders are convicted and imprisoned. It is often said that prisons should keep young offenders separate, or else the hard-bitten criminals will be a bad influence on them. But young inmates already know how to commit crime, or they would not be there. In addition, younger inmates cause the most trouble inside prisons. Officials separate prisoners by age to protect older prisoners from young thugs—not the other way around. Juvenile homes are also settings for very serious internal offending, such as frequent assaults by those in their early or mid-teens. Indeed, juvenile homes must keep constant watch to keep the stronger boys aged 12 to 14 from raping the weaker boys, or even the
counselors. The public is probably not aware of how often this happens, and does not understand that cutting personnel to save money makes the problem worse.

Some people believe that the real problem is incarceration itself, whether in juvenile or adult facilities. There are excellent ethical arguments against excessive or premature punishment (see von Hirsch, 1987). But that does not prove the innocence of youth before incarceration. To understand the impact of any incarceration in practical terms, consider the standard lockup sequence:

1. A youth lives a risky lifestyle among dangerous people,
2. is incarcerated for a certain time, and
3. returns to the same risky lifestyle and dangerous people.

To people who hang out in libraries, the middle stage seems so hellish that it could only have ruined a person stuck there. But a dangerous life before and after can be hellish, too—maybe more so. Again, it is difficult to defend the hypothesis that a largely innocent youth was ruined by the system. Moreover, health tends to improve with incarceration! Offenders use less drugs and alcohol inside, and receive better health care in prison—despite inadequacies and smuggling activities. Again, the criminal justice system—whatever its flaws—is not the center of the crime universe. We have to do our best to run prisons well, but don’t expect prisons to make the outside world better.

The innocent-youth fallacy is perpetuated by two basic distortion processes. First, young offenders with innocent faces often remain under the radar screen, so their misdeeds are not yet known by adults or by the justice system. (Facial innocence may also reflect ethnic prejudices, with whites better able to hide their delinquency.) Second, those who get deeply into substance abuse begin to look much older than they really are. A dangerous lifestyle takes its toll on the body. Those aged 18 sometimes look 22; those 22 might look 28; those 28 look 38; those 38 look 58. That helps to reinforce the misconception that bad guys are relatively old. So look beneath appearances and imagery to understand crime.

**THE INGENUITY FALLACY**

Everybody loves a hero. To have a hero you also need a villain. The ideal villain is not only bad but also highly competent at villainy—crafty, tough, and resourceful. He must be able to adjust to new situations with creativity and skill. Consider Professor Moriarty, the evil and ingenious criminal in an epic struggle
with Sherlock Holmes. It would hardly be fair to send the brilliant Holmes chasing after a drunken fool. Our ideas about classic criminals also include the skilled cat burglar who can slip into a third-story room of sleeping victims, quietly pocket valuables, then glide down the drainpipe with nary a worry of excess gravity. Edwin Sutherland (1933) chronicled his interviews with Chick Conwell in *The Professional Thief, by a Professional Thief*. This offender knew how to switch fake jewels for real ones right in front of the storeowner, and had the skill to trick people out of their money, to pick pockets, and to crack safes.

The ingenuity fallacy is the tendency to assume that many or most offenders are highly skilled. I am not denying that there are exceptions, but most crime is all too simple, requiring no advanced skills. Lightweight durables are easy to steal. Empty homes with flimsy locks and neighbors away are easy to break into. It is hardly worth the trouble to crack a safe—not only are today’s safes much better, but almost nobody knows how to break into them. The Internet and online shopping make theft of credit card numbers easier and more lucrative. Most credit card thieves are on the lower end of the scale of sophistication (although they might buy card numbers from more skilled hackers).

Embarrassed victims don’t want to admit how foolish they were or how easily they were victimized. It’s common to tell others a professional criminal broke into my house. People who hide the jewels in the cookie jar or the money in the bathroom think that nobody else ever thought of that. Remember that the burglar’s mother uses these hiding places, too. If you were looking for someone else’s valuables, where would you look?

Most crimes only take a tiny slice of time to commit. Thefts may take 10 seconds or less. An open garage invites a 30-second offense. A burglary needs a minute or two. He makes a mess rummaging quickly, then leaves with some money or jewelry. Robbery also is a quick crime. If someone points a gun at you and asks, “Your money or your life?” how long does it take you to decide? An offender can easily figure out how to get others to comply with his wishes. That’s why most crimes involve so little planning, plotting, or creativity (see Chapter 3).

### THE ORGANIZED-CRIME FALLACY

Max Weber (1978) described the process of formal organization and rationality on which modern societies are built. A formal organization has written rules, communications, and records. Its employees have official job duties, for which
they are trained and recruited. It follows clear and formal patterns of promotion. A formal organization has a definite division of labor and hierarchy, with assignments flowing downward and accountability upward.

Most important, formal organizations stipulate **impersonal** relationships among employees and between employees and customers. That means that every customer gets the same-sized ice cream cone. Every student faces the same rules in seeking financial aid from the university. Everybody has a right to apply for a job opening and to be considered seriously. Even if these rules are sometimes violated, they are the normal operating procedure in business, government, and universities for a modern society.

Do crime organizations fit this model of a formal organization?

On television and in the movies, fictional crime organizations indeed have rules, organized hierarchies, and normal operating procedures. They have regular meetings in wood-paneled rooms, with well-dressed people giving orders down the line. Even their murders seem to be calm and organized.

But in real life, most organized crime is far less formal or routine. The whole idea of crime is to **avoid** going to meetings! In real life, criminal enterprises can be very risky. Offenders have the most to fear from one another, but they also have to worry about police. The formal organization model cannot work for most criminal enterprises. For example, those who traffic in valuable illegal drugs face considerable danger. The leading analyst of this process, Edward Kleemans, explains that illicit enterprises cannot buy or sell commodities via a stock exchange, cannot rely on contract protection, or make easy use of the banking system. They have no way to insure their cargo or to resolve disagreements with attorneys or friendly mediators (Kleemans, 2012; Kleemans, Soudijn, & Weenink, 2012).

One solution is to use violence and intimidation. However, a criminal enterprise cannot survive if it is at war within itself on a daily basis. As a result, illicit business requires building trust between criminals—an uneasy process! Professor Tremblay (1993) explains the problems adult offenders face in finding suitable co-offenders. To accomplish that, organizing crime requires working mostly with long-time friends or family members, with known members of one’s own village or neighborhood and one’s own social circle or ethnic group, and to stick with the same associates if they have proven reliable. One does not go on the open market in search of co-offenders.

That’s why organized criminals cannot work on an impersonal basis. They must be highly personal, picking associates very carefully. Criminal conspiracy
is risky, since other offenders can cheat you any time, turn you in to police, and attack or even kill you. And they may decide their share of the loot is greater than you think it should be. In general, ongoing criminal enterprises must minimize the number of co-offenders to avoid betrayal. They must act quickly to escape detection. Thus, the formal organization model is not likely to work in most cases. That’s why criminal cooperation is often at a smaller scale than its televised version. Most criminal conspiracies work like a chain letter. Perhaps Joe grows marijuana and sells some to Mary. She distributes smaller packages among five others. They break packages down more for a few more people, and so on. Each of these packages is handed off very quickly. This illegal network may involve many people, but few of them know each other. If one is arrested, only one or two others might be incriminated. Peter Reuter (1998), an economic expert in illicit markets, shows that drugs and gambling have much simpler organizations than their popular image. Don’t forget how easy and quick it is to hand someone a package in return for money, to take a bet, or to sell quick sex.

Most crime organization is very rudimentary. A drug supplier meets the person he supplies at McDonald’s. Two guys have a drink at a bar and discuss what they need to do later that day. Somebody hides something in the car and crosses the border. A bar owner lets the local prostitutes hang out in return for a kickback. A drivers’ license official sells licenses on the side. A purchasing agent buys several thousand desks for the university from the vendor who offers a bribe.

Klaus von Lampe (2011) describes how illegal cigarette smuggling works. Although cigarettes are legal commodities, they are smuggled across borders to evade the very high taxes. It is worth it to smugglers, stores, and consumers to trade in untaxed cigarettes. It occurs through various mechanisms, and it is not very difficult. Nor is it difficult to find small merchants and street vendors to sell them. Although criminal cooperation is essential, it does not require an elaborate or formal organization.

When the Iron Curtain fell and Europe united, there were improvements in prosperity and human cooperation. The border controls were removed. The bad news is that this opened the door for great increases in organized crime across Europe. Illegal trafficking grew not only for cigarettes, but also for drugs, guns, illegal laborers, and movement of prostitutes across borders. Much of that criminal cooperation occurred in networks—one person to recruit the girls
in Poland, another to transport a girl or two into Germany, another to work out what house of prostitution each would work in. Not all members of the network know each other or meet in the same room. To quote Soudijn and Kleemans:

Depending on the number of people to be smuggled, almost anybody can enter this market. Someone might lend his passport once a year to enable somebody else to travel as a look-alike. However, if people are to be smuggled by the dozen every month, a certain kind of organization is called for to facilitate such a large number of people. Such organizations often develop from successful small-scale human smugglers coping with growing demand. (2009, p. 461)

Of course, some crime organizations grow larger and involve more people who know one another. In an extreme case, organized criminals can take over large segments of society, especially when the central government is extremely weak. Examples are found in Southern Italy and some developing countries. But even these more dominant forms of organized crime depend on informal ties and personal trust as they become more hierarchical.

THE BIG GANG FALLACY

Juvenile gangs have a remarkable image as cohesive, ruthless, organized groups of alienated youths who dominate local crime, do the nation’s drug trafficking, provide a surrogate family, and kill anybody who quits. The most famous gangs are often seen as national or even international. The big gang fallacy greatly exaggerates the span and role of juvenile gangs.

I treat this fallacy in much greater detail in Chapter 7. But for now, let me raise these questions:

1. Normal teenagers are highly volatile in their social relations. Why would gang members be any less volatile than other youths?
2. Why would a normal thief want to divide the loot up with a lot of other people, getting a smaller share himself?
3. Do people really like to fight all the time, or to get hurt over and over?

The leading expert on juvenile gangs, Professor Malcolm W. Klein, started by studying gangs face to face (Klein, 1971). He expected to find coherent groups of boys involved in exciting things. Instead, they were extremely boring
most of the time. Klein learned that gangs have very loose structures: people fading in and out, and that gangs often disintegrate. Klein described the street gang as an onion, with each part peeling off to reveal another part, then another, until you got to the core. The few core members were more active than the others (i.e., they hung out regularly, doing next to nothing). Yet most members were peripheral—there one day and not the next. Surprisingly, Klein’s experience revealed that the social workers trying to help boys escape from gangs were actually keeping the gangs cohesive. Gangs with no social workers to help them fell apart even more often. Klein’s (1995) landmark follow-up book, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*, punctures many preconceptions about gangs (see also Klein, Maxson, & Cunningham, 1991). Klein and his associates were not persuaded by the televised version of the gang, or by police press releases.

One of the fascinating features of crime is that so much harm can be done with so little togetherness. A juvenile gang may do evil, but it seldom does cohesive evil.

THE AGENDA FALLACY

The agenda fallacy refers to the fact that many people have an agenda and hope you will assist them. They want you to take advice, vote a certain way, or join their religious group. They may be totally sincere, but still they have plans for you. Their promise, usually bogus, is that their agenda will greatly reduce crime in society.

Moral Agendas

Many people believe that declining morality is the cause of crime. Many parents and leaders think you can teach children what’s right, then they will simply do it. If they do wrong, that proves you did not teach them the right thing. So if youths do bad things, they must have bad parents and teachers, or they must have learned bad things from bad peers.

That also means that if you set up a program to teach morality, those in the program will be good from then on. Or if the school has kids pray and promise to be good, they will keep that promise. Very wishful thinking.

Researchers have repeatedly proven this morality argument to be wrong. Starting with Festinger (1957) research on cognitive dissonance repeatedly finds that moral attitudes do not simply produce moral behavior. Indeed, prior
behaviors can change attitudes as much as attitudes can change behaviors, or more! A study by Judson Mills (1958) found that many people faced with temptation violate their own moral rules. We should not be surprised that hypocrisy is a normal part of human life.

Progressing through adolescence leads to more experience with rule-breaking—one’s own and one’s friends. Several studies find that such experience leads young people to adjust their moral standards downwards. They become more tolerant and forgiving of their friends and themselves, changing their moral expressions to reflect behavior. (See Rebellon & Manasse, 2007; Engels, Luijpers, Landsheer, & Meeus, 2004; Bruggeman & Hart, 1996). Indeed, illegal behavior has more influence on conventional beliefs than the other way around.

Dennis Wrong (1961) was right. Moral standards do not guarantee moral behavior, nor does immoral behavior prove a lack of moral training. For example, the high murder rate in the United States compared to Canada does not prove that Americans believe more in murder or that they are trained to commit it. If that were the case, why do US laws set such high levels of punishment for murder? Why would US public opinion show such outrage at murderers and other serious criminals? And why would US nonlethal violence rates be lower than those of so many industrial countries, including Canada?

Consider a parallel question: Why do people become overweight? They don’t want to be fat. They aren’t trained to be fat. They don’t need to be convinced. The problem is that we Americans are raised on rich food, can buy it cheaply, and our daily activities burn off too few calories. People don’t always follow their own rules.

This is not arguing against trying to instill morality. It’s good to teach right from wrong, but you cannot really expect people to follow those rules without being reminded again and again. Each of us knows the rules and that someone might turn us in for breaking them. Morals give Joe a license to watch Peter, and Peter a license to watch Joe. Informal mutual supervision is essential for society to function.

**Religious Agendas**

Many religious groups feel that conversion to their faith or values will prevent crime and that failure to follow will lead to more crime. Yet the Old South, the most religious region of the United States, also has very high crime rates. The greater US religious observance (compared to Europe) has not given
us lower homicide rates. Hartshorne and May (1928–1930) found that young people in religious schools were just as likely to lie and cheat as those in public schools. Bruggeman and Hart (1996) found that 70 percent of religious school students had cheated on tests, offering justifications similar to students in other schools.

To be sure, some studies find correlations between churchgoing activity and avoidance of crime. Let me suggest that youths inclined to break laws have trouble sitting still in church, so they don’t go. Some researchers may find a negative correlation between churchgoing and offending. But the inconsistency of the data on that conclusion tells us to look elsewhere. Churchgoing and crime avoidance correlate for an entirely nonreligious reason: the presence of greater self-control (see M. Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Youths who can sit still and do what parents tell them tend to get into less trouble all around.

But let’s give religious institutions credit. They often do a better job of supervising people. A close watch on the flock keeps it from straying. Church schools tend to be smaller than public high schools, giving them more effective supervision of youths. They also kick out anybody who behaves too poorly. Smaller church groups can keep close tabs on their flock and thereby remove crime opportunities. Religious groups with quite incompatible beliefs might get somewhere in crime prevention by supervising young people closely. But they have the same problem as everybody else: Turn their heads and their young flock strays; and even the older flock needs some supervision.

Social and Political Agendas

A wide array of political and social agendas has been linked to crime prevention. If you are concerned about sexual morality, tell people that sexual misbehavior leads to crime. If you are a feminist, proclaim that rape is produced by antifeminism. If you dislike pornography, link it to sexual or other crimes. If the entertainment media offend your sensibilities, blame them for crime and demand censorship as a crime prevention method. If you are in favor of a minimum wage as part of your agenda, then why not argue that it will prevent crime? Right-wing, left-wing, or whatever your agenda, if there is something you oppose, blame that for crime; if there is something you favor, link that to crime prevention. If there is some group you despise, blame them and protect others; this is what Richard and Stephen Felson (1993) call “blame analysis”
Eight Fallacies About Crime

(also see R. Felson, 2001). Joel Best (1999) goes so far as to write about “the victim industry,” publicizing its sufferings in order to make claims on society. These are political tactics, not the way to study crime. Many crime reduction claims are far-fetched, even if the proposals are sometimes good.

Welfare-State Agendas

It’s very common to assume that crime is part of a larger set of social evils, such as unemployment, poverty, social injustice, or human suffering. That’s why some people favor the welfare state, arguing that providing more social programs will reduce crime. Others hate the welfare state and blame it for crime increases.

It is interesting to see partisans on this issue pick out their favorite indicators, samples of nations, and periods of history in trying to substantiate their assertions that rising poverty or inequality produce crime. Yet most crime rates went down during the Great Depression. We see all the economic indicators rising with crime from 1963 to 1975 (see Cohen & M. Felson, 1979; M. Felson & Cohen, 1981). We see the same indicators changing inversely to crime in the past few years in the United States. These inconsistencies tell us that the welfare-state arguments are fallacious.

Consider the crime rate changes since World War II. Improved welfare and economic changes, especially for the 1960s and 1970s, correlated with more crime! Also, Sweden’s crime rates increased 5-fold and robberies 20-fold during the very years (1950 to 1980) when its Social Democratic government was implementing more and more programs to enhance equality and protect the poor (see Dolmen, 1990; D. Smith, 1995; Wikström, 1985). Other “welfare states” in Europe (such as the Netherlands) experienced at least as vast increases in crime as the United States, whose poverty is more evident and whose social welfare policies are stingier. Clearly, something was happening in all industrial societies leading to a wave of crime that only recently has leveled off or been reversed.

America’s welfare stinginess relative to Europe is often used to explain allegedly higher levels of crime and violence in the United States. It is hard to make international comparisons when laws and police collection methods differ. But we now have a way to solve the problem. In a major scientific coup, Patricia Mayhew of the British Home Office and Professor Jan van Dijk of
the University of Leiden in the Netherlands negotiated a worldwide research effort. Thanks to them, a single crime victimization survey was translated and administered in many different nations. Results of that work are now showing that the United States does not have higher general crime victimization rates than other developed countries. Nor is violence higher in the United States! In fact, the 2005 victim surveys in 15 industrialized countries (van Dijk, van Kesteren, & Smit, 2008) found this rank order in overall victimization:

1. Ireland
2. England and Wales
3. New Zealand
4. Iceland
5. Northern Ireland
6. Estonia
7. Netherlands
8. Denmark
9. Mexico
10. Switzerland
11. Belgium
12. United States
13. Canada
14. Australia
15. Sweden

Note in these cross-sectional data that some of the more generous welfare states of Europe, especially in Northern Europe, often have higher victimization rates than the United States. Other general welfare states have lower victimization rates. Yet Canada and Australia, which have much more generous welfare systems, have comparable violence rates. Additional data (van Dijk et al., 2008) on robbery, sexual assault, and assault with force show the United States having relatively modest rates of nonlethal violence. The view that the United States is the violence capital is further undermined by research showing that school bullying is virtually a universal problem among nations (P. Smith et al., 1999). British police may carry no guns, but big British kids still beat up little ones (Phillips, 2003).
Nonetheless, the United States has much higher *homicide* rates than any developed country of the world. How can we be moderate in general violence but very high in lethal violence? The presence of guns in the United States makes the difference (e.g., see Sloan et al., 1988; Zimring, 2001; Zimring & Hawkins, 1999). Americans are not more violent than Europeans; we just do a better job of finishing people off.

Welfare systems are largely beside the point for crime reduction. This is not an argument against fighting poverty or unemployment. These are valuable goals in their own right, but don’t depend on them for security. Crime seems to march to its own drummer, largely ignoring social injustice, inequality, government social policy, welfare systems, poverty, unemployment, and the like. To the extent that crime rates respond at all to these phenomena, crime may actually increase with prosperity because there is more to steal. In any case, crime does not simply flow from other ills. As Shakespeare writes,

*The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.*

—*All’s Well That Ends Well*, Act IV, Scene 3

Crime has become a moral, religious, and political football to be kicked around by people with agendas. If you want to learn about crime, you do not have to give up your commitments, but keep them in their proper place. Learn everything you can about crime for learning’s sake, not for such ulterior motives as gaining moral leadership, political power, or religious converts. If your political and religious ideas are worthwhile, they should stand on their own merits.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has given you a good idea of what you have to overcome to understand crime. You have to resist the most dramatic stories about crime. Stop thinking about the police and justice system as the center of crime. Admit to yourself your own rule-breaking and your human potential to do harm. Resist the verbiage about big gangs and big agendas.

So many misconceptions have crept into your thinking about crime that you must work to purge them. Statistics are thrown at you that don’t paint the entire crime picture. The media keep coming back at you with dramatic examples that miss the point. The police and courts are important, but unrepresentative.
Defense mechanisms are strong for denying one’s own crime potential. Victims remain in denial about how easily they were outsmarted. Distorted images of crime organization and gangs recur. Ignorant observers link crime to one pestilence after another, or fear the most unlikely events, while forgetting about common risks. Those with axes to grind keep promising that their agendas will stop crime. If you can push aside all of these distractions, you are ready to break down crime into its most basic elements.

**MAIN POINTS**

1. The dramatic fallacy: The media distort crime for their own purposes, creating many of our erroneous conceptions about crime.
2. The cops-and-courts fallacy: The importance and influence of police and courts as proactive controls over crime are overstated.
3. The not-me fallacy: Crime is committed by everyone, and the “criminal” is not much different from us.
4. The innocent-youth fallacy: Being young doesn’t mean being innocent.
5. The ingenuity fallacy: Most crime is simple and most criminals are unskilled.
6. The organized-crime fallacy: Criminal conspiracies are attributed much greater organization and sophistication than they actually have.
7. The big gang fallacy: The span and role of juvenile gangs has been greatly exaggerated.
8. The agenda fallacy: Crime is used haphazardly by a variety of people with moral, religious, social, and political agendas.

**PROJECTS AND CHALLENGES**

*Interview project.* Interview anyone who works in private security or retail trade. Find out what offenses are common and how they are carried out.

*Media project.* Take notes of three different nightly news programs. What crimes or crime statistics do they cover and how? What crimes do they fail to cover? How are the crime statistics represented?
**Map project.** Find an interactive crime mapping program of a city or police department and create a map of robberies or burglaries for one year. Note how these crimes cluster in space, even on a very local level. (To do this assignment, search online for a city you know or that interests you, then move in on the crime map so you can see variations from block to block. Also try to learn about crime maps at http://www.nij.gov/topics/technology/maps/Pages/welcome.aspx. For extra guidance in creating maps, see works by Boba, 2008; Chainey & Ratcliffe, 2005; Harries, 1999.)

**Photo project.** Take five plain photographs indicating that a crime might have been committed at that very location. Discuss what makes you suspect this.

**Web project.** Find some of the sources mentioned in this chapter, or their updates, via the Internet. Look at a table relevant to this chapter and describe it. Look especially at www.popcenter.org.