

Agnews General Strain Theory in Criminology

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Introduction

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory is one of the most influential modern explanations of crime and delinquency because it broadens the meaning of strain beyond economic failure. Earlier strain theories often emphasized the gap between culturally valued goals, such as wealth or status, and legitimate opportunities to achieve them. Agnew argued that people experience many kinds of adverse relationships and events, and that these strains can generate negative emotions that create pressure for corrective action. Crime is one possible response, but it is not inevitable. Most people who experience loss, frustration, abuse, discrimination, or failure do not offend. General Strain Theory therefore asks two linked questions: what kinds of strain are most likely to encourage crime, and what determines whether a person responds through illegal behavior, lawful coping, withdrawal, support seeking, or reinterpretation? The theory is valuable because it connects social environment with emotion and choice while leaving room for individual differences and institutional prevention. (Agnew, 1992; Agnew & White, 1992; Agnew, 2006)

The Three Major Types of Strain

Agnew identified three broad categories. The first is actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals. This includes the gap between aspirations and outcomes, perceived unfairness, or failure to receive a reward believed to be deserved. A student may work hard but see opportunities blocked, a worker may believe promotion is unfairly denied, or a young person may experience humiliation when status goals are frustrated. The second category is the removal or threatened removal of positively valued stimuli. Examples include the death of a loved one, parental separation, the end of a relationship, loss of employment, eviction, or removal from a valued school or peer group. The third category is the presentation or threatened presentation of negative stimuli, such as abuse, bullying, harsh discipline, discrimination, chronic conflict, victimization, dangerous neighborhoods, or painful working conditions.

These categories overlap in real life. A teenager exposed to family violence may also lose emotional support and struggle to achieve school goals. The theory is therefore not a checklist in which one event automatically produces one crime. It describes pressures that may accumulate. Strains are especially likely to encourage offending when they are severe, repeated, recent, perceived as unjust, associated with low social control, and create incentives or opportunities for criminal coping. The

meaning of an event depends on the individual and cultural context. The same school failure may be devastating to one person and manageable to another because their goals, alternatives, support, and identity differ.

Negative Emotions and Criminal Coping

Strain matters partly through emotion. Anger is central because it can create a desire for revenge, reduce concern about consequences, and make aggression appear justified. Other emotions can also contribute. Depression may produce withdrawal or substance use; fear may encourage escape, defensive violence, or affiliation with protective groups; humiliation may motivate status-seeking behavior; and frustration may weaken commitment to rules seen as unfair. Emotions do not mechanically cause crime. They influence attention and coping while interacting with beliefs, skills, opportunity, and social relationships.

Agnew's later work emphasized factors that make criminal coping more likely. These include poor problem-solving ability, low self-control, association with delinquent peers, beliefs favorable to crime, weak conventional support, and access to illegal opportunities. Protective factors include supportive adults, strong school attachment, emotional regulation, legitimate resources, future opportunities, and the belief that problems can be addressed lawfully. The theory therefore avoids the claim that disadvantaged or traumatized people are naturally criminal. It predicts that strain is most dangerous when social systems combine harm with isolation and offer few credible alternatives.

Strain, Social Structure, and Inequality

Although General Strain Theory focuses on individual experiences and emotions, it can also connect them to larger inequalities. Strains are not randomly distributed. Poverty can increase exposure to unsafe housing, neighborhood violence, unstable employment, school disruption, and contact with punitive institutions. Racism, sexism, and other discrimination can block opportunities while presenting repeated negative treatment. These conditions do not mean disadvantaged communities are inherently criminal; they mean some groups face more frequent or severe pressures while having fewer resources for lawful coping. Wealth can buffer strain through private counseling, relocation, legal help, or financial support, whereas the same event can become a crisis for someone without those options.

Institutional responses can either reduce or intensify strain. A school suspension may remove a student from supportive routines and increase contact with delinquent peers. A criminal record can create unemployment and housing barriers that persist after punishment. Aggressive policing can produce fear and humiliation, while unresponsive policing can leave victimization untreated. GST therefore encourages evaluation of how organizations generate unintended criminogenic pressure. It does not require eliminating all discomfort or accountability. It asks whether rules are fair, whether

responses are proportionate, and whether people retain legitimate routes to solve problems.

Evidence, Applications, and Criticism

Research has generally supported parts of General Strain Theory, particularly the relationship between victimization, negative life events, anger, and delinquency. The theory has been applied to youth violence, substance use, intimate-partner violence, workplace misconduct, terrorism, cybercrime, and institutional offending. Its flexibility is a strength because it can address many experiences ignored by purely economic theories. It also helps explain why crime may occur among people who are not economically deprived. Status loss, family conflict, discrimination, or humiliation can affect people across social classes.

Flexibility can also be a weakness. If strain is defined too broadly, almost any negative event can be used after the fact to explain offending. Researchers must specify which strains, emotions, and coping resources are measured and avoid assuming that correlation proves causation. People involved in crime may create strains through their own behavior, such as relationship loss or school exclusion, making direction difficult to determine. Cultural differences also affect whether an event is viewed as unjust and which coping responses are available. General Strain Theory works best as part of a broader explanation that includes social learning, control, opportunity, neighborhood conditions, and institutional inequality.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

At the individual level, prevention can strengthen coping before strain becomes crisis. Emotional-regulation training, problem-solving, mentoring, conflict mediation, and treatment for trauma or substance use can widen the range of available responses. At the community level, stable schools, youth employment, safe recreation, and accessible mental-health services can provide conventional attachments and practical alternatives. These policies should not be justified only as crime control; they improve wellbeing even for the majority of strained people who would never offend.

GST also has implications for correctional practice. Incarceration often adds separation, victimization risk, stigma, and blocked opportunity. Some punishment is intended to be burdensome, but conditions that intensify anger and hopelessness can undermine rehabilitation. Programs that maintain family contact, teach coping, provide education, and support reentry are consistent with the theory because they reduce strains and expand legitimate options. Supervision should combine accountability with realistic access to housing, treatment, and work; otherwise technical failures may reflect the very pressures the system creates.

For research, the theory benefits from longitudinal studies that measure strain before offending and examine changes in emotion and coping over time. Researchers should distinguish objective events from subjective interpretation, because both matter. They should also test positive coping and

resilience rather than studying only people who offend. Understanding why many individuals endure severe strain without crime can improve prevention and keep the theory from pathologizing adversity.

Finally, GST can inform evaluation of prevention programs by asking whether they actually reduce harmful strain or merely demand better self-control from people whose circumstances remain unchanged. Durable prevention combines personal skills with fair institutions.

This distinction protects the theory from becoming a justification for blaming individuals.

The theory's policy value lies in prevention rather than excuse. If severe and unjust strains increase risk, institutions should reduce avoidable harm and strengthen lawful coping. Schools can address bullying, exclusion, and arbitrary discipline while providing counseling and restorative processes. Communities can improve access to mental-health care, stable housing, employment, recreation, and victim services. Families can receive support before conflict becomes crisis. Criminal justice agencies can recognize trauma without treating it as destiny and can offer education, treatment, and reentry resources that reduce new strains after release. Accountability remains necessary, but punishment that adds humiliation, isolation, and blocked opportunity may increase the conditions associated with further offending.

General Strain Theory explains crime as one possible adaptation to adverse experiences filtered through emotion, interpretation, support, and opportunity. Its three categories—blocked goals, loss of valued stimuli, and exposure to negative stimuli—provide a useful framework, but they do not predict that every strained person will offend. The theory is most persuasive when it explains differences in coping and when it is tested with precise evidence. Its enduring contribution is the recognition that crime prevention must address not only offenders' choices but also the social relationships and institutions that shape the pressures under which choices are made.

References

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