

Hans von Hentig and Crime and Human Nature Analysis

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Introduction

Hans von Hentig's *The Criminal and His Victim* and James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature* approach crime from different analytical levels. Von Hentig helped establish victimology by examining relationships among offenders, victims, circumstances, and vulnerability, while Wilson and Herrnstein sought a broader explanation of offending through incentives, development, temperament, family, social environment, and individual differences. Both works were influential because they challenged one-dimensional explanations, but both also contain claims that require substantial modern qualification. Von Hentig's victim classifications can slide into victim-blaming when vulnerability is confused with responsibility, while Wilson and Herrnstein's discussions of intelligence and biological disposition can be interpreted too deterministically if historical and structural conditions are ignored. Contemporary criminology treats these factors probabilistically rather than as destinies. Crime emerges through interactions among individuals, relationships, opportunity, institutions, inequality, and law. The two books remain useful not because either supplies a complete theory, but because each identifies mechanisms that later scholarship has tested, revised, and placed within a more ethical and evidence-based framework.

Von Hentig and the Development of Victimology

Von Hentig's major contribution was to challenge criminology's tendency to treat the victim as merely the passive endpoint of an offender's action. He examined what he called the criminal-victim dyad and argued that relationships, routines, social position, age, conflict, and situational vulnerability could influence how particular offenses unfold (von Hentig, 1948). That insight helped establish victimology as a field concerned with patterns of victimization, repeat risk, trauma, institutional response, compensation, and victims' rights. Some of von Hentig's typologies, however, reflect the assumptions of his period and would now be considered stigmatizing or overly deterministic. Studying vulnerability is legitimate; inferring moral responsibility from vulnerability is not. A person may drink alcohol, argue, travel alone, trust a fraudulent offer, or live in a high-risk environment without consenting to assault, theft, or exploitation. Modern victimology therefore separates causal sequence from culpability. It asks how offenders select targets, how environments create opportunity, and how institutions can reduce harm, while maintaining that responsibility for an offense remains with the

person who commits it.

Wilson and Herrnstein on Choice, Development, and Individual Differences

Wilson and Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature* attempts to integrate several explanations rather than reduce offending to poverty or one social condition. They emphasize expected rewards and costs, present orientation, development, temperament, family experience, school performance, opportunity, and social organization (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Their account is useful when it recognizes that people differ in how strongly they value immediate rewards and future consequences and that those differences interact with situations. It becomes more controversial when biological or intelligence-related differences are interpreted as stable causes of criminality. Contemporary research recognizes gene-environment interaction, developmental plasticity, trauma, education, discrimination, neighborhood conditions, peer influence, and institutional response; no genetic marker, test score, or physical trait determines whether a person will offend. The theory is also incomplete for crimes that require sustained planning, organizational authority, or specialist knowledge, such as corporate fraud, corruption, cybercrime, and state violence. Individual propensities matter, but opportunity, norms, power, and social context determine how those propensities are expressed and which harmful acts are criminalized or enforced.

Victim Responsibility, Mental Illness, and Structural Context

Both books can be misused when explanatory factors are converted into labels about who deserves harm or who is naturally dangerous. Victim-precipitation concepts are particularly risky in sexual violence and intimate partner abuse because they can shift attention from coercion to the victim's conduct. Similarly, mental illness should not be treated as a general explanation for serious violence. Most people with mental-health conditions are not violent and are often more likely to experience victimization than to harm others. Severe violence is better understood through interacting factors such as prior violence, access to weapons, substance use, grievance, acute crisis, social context, and specific behavioral warning signs rather than through diagnosis alone. Poverty also affects stress, opportunity, neighborhood conditions, and access to legitimate resources without making poor people inherently criminal; wealthy individuals and organizations commit fraud, exploitation, environmental crime, and corruption as well. These examples illustrate why contemporary criminology must examine structural power alongside individual behavior. Recorded crime reflects not only offending but also policing priorities, legal definitions, reporting practices, and differential exposure to enforcement.

Policy Implications and Evidence-Based Prevention

A modern reading of von Hentig supports victim-centered prevention when it identifies repeat-risk situations, strengthens survivor services, improves environmental safety, and changes institutional responses without blaming victims. Safer transport, fraud prevention, confidential shelters, workplace safeguards, responsive policing, compensation, and trauma-informed care can reduce harm while preserving offender accountability. Wilson and Herrnstein's focus on incentives and development supports interventions that reduce immediate opportunities for crime, strengthen childhood support, improve school attachment, build emotional regulation, and increase the certainty rather than the cruelty of consequences. Neither framework justifies labeling children as future offenders or using presumed biological risk to allocate punishment. Effective prevention works at multiple levels: family support, mentoring, education, treatment, environmental design, focused deterrence, economic opportunity, fair policing, and reentry assistance. Restorative approaches can add attention to harm and repair when participation is voluntary and safe. The practical lesson is that theories should guide testable interventions rather than ideological loyalty. Programs should be evaluated for measurable outcomes, unequal effects, and unintended harms, because a concept that sounds plausible can still fail when implemented in a real community.

Conclusion

The Criminal and His Victim and *Crime and Human Nature* remain important because they widened criminology's field of vision in different directions. Von Hentig made the victim-offender relationship an object of systematic inquiry and helped create modern victimology, while Wilson and Herrnstein drew attention to incentives, development, individual differences, and environmental opportunity. Their limitations are equally instructive. Victim typologies can become victim-blaming when risk is mistaken for responsibility, and theories of biology or intelligence can become deterministic when social structure, discrimination, development, and institutional power are minimized. Contemporary criminology is strongest when it treats risk factors as probabilistic and combines person, relationship, situation, community, and law. Crime prevention therefore should not depend on a single explanation or on stereotypes about victims, poor communities, or mental illness. The enduring value of these works lies in the questions they generated, not in treating every historical claim as current consensus. Critical reading allows their conceptual contributions to inform prevention while rejecting assumptions that conflict with stronger evidence, fairness, and respect for victims.

References

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