What counts as crime and deviance?

01 / DEFINITIONS, RULES AND REACTIONS



Connect the ideas as you revise

Key concepts

Crime: behaviour that breaks criminal law. **Deviance:** behaviour that goes against social norms. An act may be both, one or neither.

Norm: an expected way to behave. **Value:** a belief about what matters. **Conformity:** following expectations.

Social construction: people create and apply meanings and rules. Crime and deviance vary across time, place and social groups.

Use an example

Talking loudly may be normal at a match but deviant in a quiet library. The behaviour is judged differently because the setting changes.

Laws can change. Behaviour can stop being a crime even though some people still disapprove of it.

Social construction does not mean harm is imaginary. Ask who makes rules, who applies them and who is affected.

Vocabulary

Social order: enough stability for people to live together. **Consensus:** agreement. **Conflict:** competing interests.

Sanction: a reward or punishment for behaviour. **Stigma:** a strongly negative social judgement.

Outsiders

Becker (1963) | AQA

Social groups make rules and apply labels to people who break them. Powerful people are more able to make a label stick. Reactions help shape who is seen as deviant.

Use it: Explain why the same act may produce different reactions.

Think about: Labelling explains reactions well, but may not explain the first act or the harm it causes.

How labelling can work

Master status: a label becomes the main way others see a person. Other qualities may be overlooked.

Self-fulfilling prophecy: treatment linked to a label makes the expected behaviour more likely.

Deviant career: repeated reactions and exclusion may lead someone towards a deviant group or identity.

Label > exclusion > fewer opportunities > possible further offending. People can also reject labels.

Compare the perspectives

Interactionism: asks how labels and everyday reactions shape deviance.

Functionalism: asks how rules, shared values and social pressures affect behaviour.

Marxism: asks how class power shapes laws and their enforcement.

Feminism: asks how gender and patriarchy shape control, offending and treatment.

The Rules of Sociological Method

Durkheim (1895) | Extra theory

Crime exists in every society. Public reactions can remind people of moral boundaries and bring them together. Challenges to rules can also help society change.

Use it: Explain possible functions of crime.

Think about: This does not mean every crime benefits people. Too much crime can damage social order.

Link ideas to evidence

Do not just say crime is "positive" or "negative". Explain the process. A public response may unite people while the crime still harms victims.

Why do people break rules?

02 / STRAIN, SUBCULTURES AND CLASS



Connect the ideas as you revise

Social Structure and Anomie

Merton (1938) | AQA ideas

People are encouraged to seek goals such as wealth. They do not all have the same access to legal ways of achieving them. This gap creates **strain**.

Use it: Explain how blocked opportunities may lead to crime.

Think about: Many people facing disadvantage do not offend. Not every crime aims to gain money.

Five responses to strain

Conformity: accept goals and legal means. **Innovation:** accept goals but use different, possibly illegal means.

Ritualism: follow the rules but give up ambitious goals. **Retreatism:** withdraw from both goals and means.

Rebellion: reject existing goals and means and seek new ones. Not all five responses involve crime.

Vocabulary

Anomie: weakened guidance from norms. **Structural explanation:** focuses on society's organisation and unequal opportunities.

Relative deprivation: feeling worse off compared with others. It can happen above the level of severe poverty.

Delinquent Boys

Albert Cohen (1955) | AQA

Some working-class boys could not gain status through school success. They faced **status frustration** and formed groups with different values. Behaviour rejected at school could win approval in the group.

Use it: Explain offences done for peer status, rather than money.

Think about: Not all boys share one set of goals. The theory gives less attention to girls and adult offenders.

Subcultures

Subculture: a group with some different norms and values. A subculture is not always criminal.

Delinquency: offending or rule-breaking, often used for young people.

Frustration > group with alternative values > peer reward for rule-breaking. This is a possible explanation, not an inevitable path.

Marxist explanations

Capitalism encourages competition and the desire to own goods. Unequal resources may make legal success harder for some people.

Laws protect property, but also regulate businesses and protect people. Marxists question whose interests receive most attention.

Selective policing may make some offences more visible than others. Poverty alone does not explain every offence.

White Collar Crime

Sutherland (1949) | Extra

Sutherland challenged the idea that crime is only a problem among poor people. High-status people can offend through their jobs.

Use it: Broaden explanations beyond street crime.

Types of crime

White-collar crime: offences through a high-status occupation, such as fraud. **Corporate crime:** offences for a business's benefit.

These crimes can have serious victims and costs. Complex evidence, hidden activity and enforcement choices may affect detection.

How is behaviour controlled?

Formal and informal control

Formal social control: official rules and sanctions. Police, courts, prisons and probation are examples.

Informal social control: unwritten expectations and reactions. Family, peers, religion and media can influence behaviour.

Positive sanctions: praise or rewards. **Negative sanctions:** disapproval or punishment.

An agency can use more than one kind of control. A school has written rules as well as informal peer pressure.

Different interpretations

Functionalists: control helps maintain social order.

Marxists: ask whether control serves powerful classes.

Feminists: examine control linked to gender.
Interactionists: examine how rules and labels are applied.

Women and Crime

Heidensohn (1985) | AQA

Patriarchal control can restrict women's opportunities to offend. At home, care duties and male control limit freedom. At work, hierarchies can limit power. In public, fear of harassment or violence can limit movement.

Use it: Explain conformity through social control.

Think about: Women have varied lives and can resist control. The argument does not explain every gender pattern.

Vocabulary

Patriarchy: a system where men hold more power.
Control theory: asks why people conform and what may happen when controls weaken.

Gender socialisation: learning gender expectations. Different rules about risk and freedom can affect opportunities.

Women, Crime and Poverty

Carlen (1988) | AQA

In-depth interviews with 39 women explored offending. The **class deal** promises material rewards for paid work. The **gender deal** promises support and security through family roles.

Use it: Explain why crime could seem an alternative when these promised rewards were missing.

Think about: A small group of convicted women cannot represent all women. Poverty does not make crime inevitable.

Gender and treatment

Chivalry thesis: the claim that officials may treat women more leniently. Evidence needs comparing across offences and circumstances.

Double deviance: women may be judged for breaking both the law and gender expectations.

Distinguish why someone offends from how officials respond to them.

Who appears in crime figures?

04 / CLASS, GENDER, ETHNICITY AND AGE

Groups Detection Treatment

Connect the ideas as you revise

Social class

Some disadvantaged groups appear more often in official offender data. Strain, fewer opportunities and peer status may help explain this.

Policing, legal resources and the visibility of offences also matter. White-collar and corporate offences can be hard to detect.

Official offender figures are not a complete measure of all offending.

Gender

Men account for most recorded offending and prisoners. Explanations include socialisation, opportunities, peer cultures and different controls.

Heidensohn explains conformity; Carlen explains some women's offending. The chivalry thesis concerns treatment.

Avoid assuming all men are risk-takers or all women are closely controlled.

Ethnicity

Some ethnic groups are overrepresented at stages of the criminal justice system. This does not show that ethnicity itself causes crime.

Consider class, age profile, location, police activity, discrimination and reporting. Broad ethnic categories contain diverse experiences.

Institutional racism: organisational practices that unfairly disadvantage racialised groups.

Age

Young people appear more often in many offender statistics. Peer pressure, risk, opportunities and less settled routines may help explain this.

Police attention and visible public behaviour also affect recording. Older people can offend, including through jobs or online activity.

Different offences have different age patterns.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

Macpherson (1999) | Extra inquiry

The inquiry into the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's racist murder identified institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police.

Use it: Explain why organisational practices matter, beyond individual prejudice.

Think about: It is evidence about a specific investigation and institution, not proof about every officer or every ethnic pattern.

Victims and offenders

People at greater risk of victimisation are not necessarily the same as those most likely to appear as offenders.

Risk varies by offence, place, age, gender and circumstances. One group can face both suspicion and high levels of victimisation.

Vocabulary

Criminal justice system: police, courts and services that deal with offences. **Conviction:** being found guilty.

Discrimination: unfair treatment linked to group membership. **Stereotype:** a simplified assumption about a group.

Overrepresentation: a group forms a larger share of a category than of the comparison population.

Build a careful explanation

Separate three questions: Who offends? Who is detected? Who is punished? Use evidence relevant to each.

Compare social explanations with recording processes. A group pattern does not describe every individual.

How do we measure crime?

05 / SOURCES, THE DARK FIGURE AND TRENDS







Connect the ideas as you revise

Police recorded crime

Counts offences reported to and recorded by police. It gives detail on place and offence type, and is useful for serious offences such as homicide.

It misses unreported or unrecorded crime. Changes in laws, police activity or recording rules affect comparisons.

Dark figure: crime missing from official recorded totals. Fear, shame, distrust or not knowing an offence happened can prevent reporting.

Victim surveys

Ask people about crimes they experienced, including incidents never reported to police. The CSEW covers England and Wales.

Memory, willingness to answer and the survey's coverage affect results. A survey cannot interview someone killed by a crime, and does not measure every business offence.

Self-report studies

Ask people about offences they committed. They can reveal hidden behaviour and challenge stereotypes.

People may hide, forget or exaggerate offending. Sample selection and privacy affect responses.

Compare sources

Police records show recorded events. Victim surveys show reported experiences in a sample. Self-report studies show what respondents admit doing.

Use more than one source. Differences may come from coverage and definitions, not simply one source being "wrong".

Vocabulary

Validity: how well data captures what is being studied. **Reliability:** consistency of a measure or method.

Crime rate: offences relative to a population. **Trend:** change over time. **Prevalence:** the share who experience an event.

A current example: CSEW

Headline crime was estimated at **9.6 million incidents** in the year ending March 2026, compared with about **9.4 million** the year before.

ONS found **no statistically significant change**. A small difference between sample estimates may reflect chance.

The 2026 estimate was **14% below** the comparable 2017 estimate. Fraud differs from the long-term falls in theft, damage and violence.

Source: ONS, Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026. Headline crime is not every crime.

Read figures carefully

Check the source, offence, place, date, unit and population. Do not compare UK totals with England-and-Wales rates.

An increase in recording may reflect more reporting or better recording. It does not automatically mean more offending.

Compare perspectives on data

Functionalists may use statistics to study patterns. Marxists question hidden powerful offenders. Feminists ask whether surveys and records capture abuse and women's experiences.

Crime, media and public debate

06 / MORAL PANICS, SENTENCES AND PRISONS

Media Sentences Protection

Connect the ideas as you revise

Folk Devils and Moral Panics

Stanley Cohen (1972) | Extra

Media reports about Mods and Rockers helped present them as a major threat. Exaggerated reporting and public reaction helped build a moral panic.

Use it: Explain how coverage can shape concern about crime.

Think about: Not every concern is exaggerated. Real harm still needs evidence and attention.

Vocabulary

Moral panic: an exaggerated reaction to a group or behaviour seen as a threat. **Folk devil:** a group blamed for that threat.

Deviancy amplification: reactions and control may increase or make deviance more visible.

Agenda setting: influencing what issues receive attention. **News values:** features that make stories attractive to the media.

Media and violent crime

Dramatic stories may get more coverage than common, less visible offences. Coverage can affect fear without matching the overall crime pattern.

Marxists ask about ownership and whose voices are heard. A pluralist view points to varied outlets and audiences.

Copying behaviour is a possible influence, but watching a story does not prove it caused an offence.

Why punish?

Retribution: punishment for wrongdoing. **Deterrence:** discouraging future crime.

Rehabilitation: helping someone stop offending. **Public protection:** limiting chances to cause harm.

Fines, community sentences and custody have different effects. Ask about fairness, cost, victims and future offending.

Prisons and young offenders

Custody can protect the public and offer education or treatment. It can also disrupt family ties and employment, or expose people to further criminal networks.

Young offenders may need support with education, housing and health. Debate punishment alongside prevention and rehabilitation.

A high reoffending rate alone does not prove prison caused it. Compare offences, prior histories and follow-up periods.

Make a supported judgement

For a debate, use evidence and compare explanations. Consider short-term protection and longer-term effects.

Use study titles, findings and relevant limits. **AQA** marks prescribed ideas; **Extra** broadens revision.

Link across the course

School labels, unequal life chances, family support and poverty may connect with crime. Explain the link rather than assuming one factor controls everyone's behaviour.