

Take-away thoughts on:

Messner, S. F., & Rosenfeld, R. (2007). *Crime and the American dream* (4th ed.). Monterey: Wadsworth.

Their theoretical argument is generally erudite and accepted. There has been some work using their framework to examine international crime rate differences (see Messner & Rosenfeld, *Social Forces*, 1997, and subsequent citations). Their framework has led to additional investigations.

Some potential concerns/limitations of their work, however, as noted by others or suggested here, are as follows.

1. M&R's argument seems to be schizophrenic on the topic of time, and change vs. constancy. When looking at our homicide rates and their shifts, they concentrate on what they see as a persistently high rate. Other researchers, however, looking at the exact same data, have concentrated instead on the sizable shifts.¹
2. M&R also seem to be somewhat schizophrenic in defining their outcome. In the introduction to the 4th edition (2007, p. xiii) they comment on increasing crime rates in other countries, making the US no longer unique with high violent crime rates. They then shift their relative focus for their outcomes: "A decade of falling violent crime rates in the United States and rises in many other developed nations led us to pay greater attention in this edition to cross-national differences in the social responses to crime."
Hmm...
... if what makes the U.S. different is wired so deeply into our structure and our values, from 1830s on, then how can outcomes converge without changes in cultures and values, either here or in other countries?
3. Chamlin & Cochran (p. 41)² suggest the theory may be **empirically** unfalsifiable for the following reason:

There can be little doubt that Messner and Rosenfeld's (1994, 2001) theoretical contribution to the anomie tradition evidences both originality and sophistication. Unfortunately, not unlike Durkheim's and Merton's versions of anomie theory, their formulation is not readily amenable to direct falsification. For example, using macrolevel data, how does one measure the 'dominance of the economy in the institutional balance of power', 'the effectiveness of noneconomic institutional controls' or 'anomie'? As a consequence, no direct tests of institutional anomie

¹ LaFree, G. (1998). *Losing Legitimacy: Street Crime and the Decline of Social Institutions in America*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

² Chamlin, M. B., & Cochran, J. K. (2007). An Evaluation of the assumptions that underlie institutional anomie theory. *Theoretical Criminology*, 11(1), 39-61.

have appeared in the research literature. ... One should not underestimate the value of indirect tests of macrosocial theory. **Nonetheless, in the absence of direct indicators of the intervening processes that distinguish institutional anomie theory from other macrosocial perspectives that also make claims about economic conditions affecting crime rates**, it may prove useful to employ an alternative strategy to evaluate Messner and Rosenfeld's theoretical ideas.

In other words, they are saying that at the macro-level it will be impossible to get direct indicators of the mediating cultural and/or structural predictors in this model, and **of other competing macrolevel models.**

4. Chamlin & Cochran have similarly argued that the U.S. is not unique if you compare its crime rates and its values to a broader range of nations, including non-western ones. Therefore, they make a fundamental challenge to the key starting assumption of M&R.

On the plus side, the volume provides an excellent discussion of the limits and differences between some major crime views. Further, their perspective highlights huge assumptions with crime prevention proposals from both the right and the left.

If crime prevention approaches can be broadly subsumed into two groups – root cause approaches vs. punish rational offenders – M&R provide an entirely new definition of a root cause approach to preventing crime.

If the purpose – and many would say the primary purpose – of criminological theory is to develop sounder approaches to proposing and assessing crime prevention approaches, then TAD would seem to score quite high. Many of its proposals would seem to be things that, intuitively, would lead to lower crime.

On the other hand, one can ask whether the prevention proposals derive from **their conceptual model** or the **supporting data**. One also can ask whether such proposals make any sense at all given that the broad cultural differences discussed seem to be so permanently wired in to U.S. culture. Further, whether such proposals are politically feasible (what would Garland say?), or whether we could even figure out how to specify some of these proposals, also make for interesting questions.