

**Barry Latzer**  
**What Happens Next – 04.03.2022**

Barry Latzer:

I'm Barry Latzer. I'm here to discuss the causes of crime. Criminologists blame everything on socioeconomic adversities: Poverty, residential segregation, female-headed households, high unemployment, and socially isolated large scaled communities.

These factors are relevant, so is gender, males do 10 times the violent crime of females. Age: Young males past 18 and before 40 do the bulk of violent crimes. If we only look at the last five years, which is what criminologists do, then we get a misleading picture. Criminologists need history and that's what I do in my research and writing.

When we look at the history of crime, what we see is that various groups that immigrated to the United States, or migrated within the United States, have very different violent crime rates, some extremely high, some quite low. And these differences have very little to do with social socioeconomic adversities. They were all poor with residential segregation, high unemployment, and socially isolated communities. From the late 19th century and into the 21st, some social groups had much higher violent crime rates than others, even though they were equally adversely situated, and that's the key to this.

The Jews, Japanese, Germans, and Scandinavians that immigrated here all had low violent crime rates. By contrast, the Irish, Mexicans, and believe it or not, the Chinese, at least in the late 19th and early 20th century, all had high violent crime rates. And most importantly for today's discussion, white and especially black southerners, who migrated within the United States from the South to the big cities of the North had extremely high violent crime rates. What's going on here?

These social groups subcultures engage in violence crime in response to what are perceived of as slights, insults. And it doesn't matter whether they're real. He's being offended, dissed, insulted, he's willing to resort to his gun and engage in violence.

You look at their girlfriend the wrong way, they will resort to violence. And its interpersonal quarrel and conflict that causes the vast bulk of violent crime. I am talking about rape, murder, manslaughter, and especially aggravated assault, where you use a weapon and damage the victim.

Jews, Japanese, Germans and Scandinavians, low violent crime rates, even though they're in America, they have access to guns like everybody else. Criminologists need to take this subculture of violence explanation into account. And they don't want to because many people think it's racist, it's insulting to the group. But I would argue we're talking about a culture, not a race. The subculture of violence is influenced by cultural factors that means the beliefs, the values, the behaviors of a group. It's not racial. You can take people who are black-skinned, put

them in England, put them in Africa, put them in Haiti, and they're going to have very different beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Race is not determinant.

Culture is determinant. Therefore, it's not correct to say that subculture of violence theory is racist. It's not based on race. It's based on culture.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is the common wisdom that economic conditions affect violence and crime rates?

Barry Latzer:

The general public believes crime is motivated by a need to steal when you're poor. Maybe during the Great Depression (laughs) that was true. The United States has become much more affluent. Nobody's literally starving to death.

Violent crime is not motivated by these economic determinants. Violent crime: murder, rape, assault, that's motivated by interpersonal quarrels, not economics.

Larry Bernstein:

Given that culture changes slowly, generation to generation, how do you explain the major cycles in violent behavior?

Barry Latzer:

That's excellent, Larry, because that shows the limitations of the cultural explanation. Let's take the big crime boom that started in the late '60s and ran to roughly the mid-1990s, probably the biggest violent crime boom in American. Subcultures of violence don't (laughs) change that rapidly and therefore, that couldn't possibly explain. And it doesn't. What does explain that crime boom? There are three factors that do.

First demographics, the Baby Boom. Youth is certainly a key correlate of crime. The more youth you have the more violent crime. Simple as that. And so this explosion in the youth population was a key factor in the great crime boom. I call it the Crime Tsunami of the late '60s to mid '90s. Second, the criminal justice system had gone flabby. There was a big belief in rehabilitation in the early '60s and in the '50s. And we sort of let our guard down. Police didn't make as many arrests. Sentences were much lighter. At the same time the Baby Boom is increasing crime, you have this weakened criminal justice system that's punishing people more leniently.

Third, a huge migration of African Americans from the South to the cities of the North, and this occurred in different stages. It happened in the 1920s, 1940s and in the 1960s and this big migration of African Americans to Northern cities was a big contributor to high violent crime rates. Remember, African Americans were one of the groups with high subcultures of violence, and they brought that subculture with them from the South. Anyone who lived in a big city in the '70s knows this. I lived in New York; I know it. People in Philly, they knew it, Chicago, Boston, Detroit, certainly, absolutely, Detroit.

And a sub issue was the cocaine epidemic, but that didn't start until the late '80s and the crime wave was already well under way. By then the system had toughened up and the punishments were harsher and that was the beginning of the end. That's my explanation and the question is really perfect because it shows that even the subculture of violence theory cannot fully explain why crime rises and falls.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you explain the explosion in crime rates since COVID?

Barry Latzer:

Police were holding back. They were afraid to engage with suspected offenders. And the demonstrations with the George Floyd incident, the police were diverted because there were so many protests and they were so massive that police normally assigned to deal with violent crime were assigned to protests.

The police drew back. They weren't proactive the way they normally have been in the last few decades. They weren't pursuing suspects.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of Giuliani's implementation of James Q. Wilson's Broken Window philosophy?

Barry Latzer:

I was never fully persuaded that broken window worked. Disorder is important to quell. Low-level offenses must be pursued by the police and prosecutors. I just wrote a piece critiquing the new prosecutor in Manhattan for refusing to pursue these low-level offenses. Disorder matters. If you don't arrest people who are urinating in the streets, dealing drugs even at low-levels, drinking and making noise all night long. If you don't pursue these low-level offenses, then you get disorderly communities. And disorderly communities do breed serious crime.

I agree with Wilson and Kelling, but it's not sufficient. High crime has to be dealt with on its own and not just disorder. High crime has to be dealt with strictly. And I don't mean sentences have to be lengthened, but the police have to do their job. They have to find these offenders, arrest them, and then they have to be processed and punished. That's the most important thing to do. Disorder is also important to get under control, because it contributes to the decline of communities and cities. I was in New York in the 1970s. I remember when you had disorderly behavior in New York. It keeps the law-abiding people fearful and reluctant to go in public spaces. That has a big ripple effect. People aren't going to go to the shows, restaurants, and movies.

I'm not sure that arresting these low-level offenders, and by the way, they're not going to stay in jail very long for these crimes. I'm of mixed mind on it. I don't accept the theory that clamping down on disorderly behavior prevents felonies but is important to do in its own right.

Larry Bernstein:

People walking in the neighborhood reduces crime but disorder reduces walking traffic.

Barry Latzer:

I agree. They need to make sure that the public spaces are safe and then people will walk in those communities and that does discourage crime.

More law-abiding people in an area does mean fewer disorderly types.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you explain the sharp differences in violent crime rates between Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore vs. NYC?

Barry Latzer:

There seems to be some contagion effect that takes place locally. Young people copy one another. They copy their misbehaviors. And in some cities, when some young people begin engaging in crime and disorderly conduct, other young people copy them and do the same thing. And that seems to spread. That seems to me to be the best explanation.

And once that copying hits a tipping point, then it explodes and seems to get out of control.

Larry Bernstein:

The public learns about police work from TV, shows like the Wire and Law and Order. Are these shows realistic?

Barry Latzer:

Not much, because police work is boring. If they portrayed all that boredom, you'd flip the channel to something else. Rarely are cases resolved with such finality as on television. It doesn't happen that way in the real world. Most crimes go unsolved. Large numbers go unreported.

Shooting. The overwhelming number of police never use their service revolvers on the job except in target practice. Television guys are shooting all the time that's unrealistic. So that's my beef with the dramatizations. It sort of misleads people about what's going on in the real world of policing.

Larry Bernstein:

Our approach to punishing criminals doesn't appear to work well, how can we do better?

Barry Latzer:

My proposal for certain populations where there's high rates of recidivism, mainly people who were released to parole from prison, we ought to use electronic monitoring more to substitute for incarceration. It provides some monitoring of the offender whereas under the current system, the overstretched parole officers can't monitor each and every prisoner.

Technology could be the way of the future, especially if we ever develop the technology to determine the behavior of the subject, not just the location. The current technology is like the GPS in your car. It can determine the location, but it can't really determine the behavior. Once we reach a point where we're technologically able to determine behavior, we'll see replacement of incarceration with high tech electronic monitoring. So that's the future. People are very disenchanted with the prison system. We don't have a good replacement. Maybe it's technology.

Larry Bernstein:

Rural Sicilians and rural Irish moved to urban NY, Chicago, and Boston. Was the rural to urban shift important in the violent crime story?

Barry Latzer:

When it comes to the subculture of violence, rurality is more of an influence than urbanity. Back in the 19th century, cities had less violent crime than rural areas. But when a rural group with a subculture of violence, the African-American, moves to the big cities? I argue that they'll transport that subculture of violence with them and it was the same for the Sicilian population.

Rural areas have high violent crime rates. In the first half of the 20th century, New York City had lower than average violent crime rates. The rest of the country was higher than New York City. Cities, tamed violent crime, at least that was the argument made in the 19th century. In the late 20th century, we assume it's just the opposite, that rural areas have lower crime, violent crime rates, and they do. In fact, the pecking order is urban highest, suburbs, rural areas, lowest of all.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you explain the sharp reduction in violent crime over time among the Irish, Italian, and Chinese-Americans?

Barry Latzer:

Class trumps culture. When people move up the social ladder, when they become middle class, more affluent, they shed their violent crime culture. If you look at middle class African Americans, their crime rates are much lower than lower income African Americans.

Affluence definitely reduces violence because you'd be out of your mind if you have a family, a decent job and wage, you'd be crazy to hold up a liquor store. Affluent people are not going to engage in crime. It would be self-destructive.

Larry Bernstein:

If I put you in charge, how would you change public policy?

Barry Latzer:

Woke prosecutors' policies are misguided. Disorder in cities is a disease. It ruins communities. Arrests have to happen. You can't look the other way and pretend this crime isn't occurring,

and we see with the West Coast cities, Seattle, San Francisco especially, what happened when prosecutors didn't want to prosecute.

We must attend to disorder, even though these are low level offenses. The punishments here do not contribute very much to mass incarceration because they're very light punishments. These are people who get a couple of months in a jail and don't ever see a prison.

We have to stay the course when dealing with more serious offenses. We have to use our police wisely, we have to do hotspot policing. These interventions with gangs might work and intercept the firearms. Defunding the police that's just an utter disaster.

My formula is more of the same. I don't have any panaceas, however electronic monitoring and technology can be very beneficial for the criminal justice system and we should pursue that aggressively.

Larry Bernstein:

Is it true that prisons are filled with low level drug users and not violent criminals?

Barry Latzer:

55% of violent crime, the number for drug offenders is 14%. Of the 14%, 10% or so are drug dealers, they're people who were selling, they were in the business. So only a small percent, 4% or less are drug possessors that is they weren't selling. However, even that number is high because many of these drug possession cases are simply cases that had problems and had to be pled down to drug possession. If police make an illegal seizure of the drugs, and they can't convict him of drug sales, they'll take the conviction for drug possession.

The assertion that the prisons are filled with low-level offenders, mainly drug offenders is false. Michelle Alexander who made this argument in her book *The New Jim Crow*, I just explode those arguments in my next upcoming book, they're totally false. The people in prisons are there because they've done very serious offenses over and over again. The argument that you have some kid smoking dope and he goes to prison, not true.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think we will see a sharp drop in violent crime in the African American community in the decades ahead?

Barry Latzer:

Not in my lifetime, perhaps, but decades and decades from now, black violent crime is going to be a historical phenomenon only.

Who talks about Irish violent crime today, Larry? Or Italian violent crime, except for a few mafia movies that perpetuate the stereotypes. And it's going to be the same for African-Americans, I feel very optimistic on that score.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that there are subcultures that are easily angered and resort to violence. Can we educate to dissuade them that this violent response is problematic?

Barry Latzer:

Anger management training, kind of thing?

You'd have to do such a mass level that it wouldn't be workable.

It's a long slow process. But the best thing that could happen is affluence. Affluence seems to do the trick. They move up the social ladders, they eschew violence, and the culture changes. That's the end of that subculture of violence. I don't think you could do it through education alone.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. Barry, what are you most optimistic about as it relates to violent crime?

Barry Latzer:

We have a huge gun problem and I'm not so optimistic about that. The NRA would say, guns don't kill people, people kill people, and there's a truth to that. I'm optimistic about African-Americans moving to the middle class and eschewing violence.

I think America, it sounds almost corny nowadays, but it is still a land of opportunity as long as our economy expands and as long as we don't discriminate against these groups, they will have opportunities. And, probably not in my lifetime, I'm an old man already, but it will happen. It took three generations with the Irish and the Italians.