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## Criminals: Motives



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proxy

### Definition

Criminal motives are those causes that invoke illegal actions.

### Introduction

Criminal motives are those causes that invoke illegal actions. For an action to be considered illegal, an applicable law must be broken. For an illegal action to be considered criminal, the offense must cause harm to society or property. Criminal motives shed light on the “why?” behind deviant behavior and, when coupled with evidence in court, provide jurors with additional support in considering verdict.

Often confused with intent, motive constructs are external antecedents to internal thought

processes (Maasberg et al. 2015). In this sense, motive and intent are two different elements with the former influencing the latter. Common law is founded on the principle that an individual is guilty of a crime when there is both a guilty action (*actus reus*) and guilty mind (*mens rea*). In Latin, *Actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*, or “an act is not necessarily a guilty act unless the accused has the necessary state of mind required for that offense” (Gooch and Williams 2015). Understanding a motive’s impact on intent is fundamental when determining criminal punishment, as is considering the seriousness of the crime committed.

There are several ways to classify crimes; however, based on the severity of punishment, crimes can be grouped into four separate categories: felonies, misdemeanors, felony-misdemeanors, and infractions. Criminal law defines crimes within these categories to include violent crimes, such as homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson, as well as less serious crimes, such as simple assault, fraud, vandalism, drug abuse violations, gambling, and vagrancy, to name a few.

Though federal and state law explicitly categorizes crimes, the motives that drive individuals to commit crimes are not as easily discerned. For centuries, theorists have researched and analyzed the criminal motivations that drive individuals to commit crimes. It is theorized that biological, psychological, sociological, and biosocial

factors may impact decisions to commit illegal actions. However, it is also understood that more distinguishable triggers primarily impact an individual or group to act in an aberrant way. By defining criminal motives, investigators are better equipped to bring alleged criminals to justice.

### **Gang Membership**

In law enforcement, gang dynamics is a fiercely studied and analyzed topic. Gang culture may attract potential individuals for a multitude of reasons and encourage a lifestyle that often leads to criminal activity. From acceptance to ongoing affiliation, members are motivated by both internal and external factors. Motivations often include identity or recognition (achieve a level of status), protection, fellowship/brotherhood, intimidation, and criminal activity resulting in financial gain (LAPD n.d.).

Depending on the group and region of matriculation, gangs and their leadership may require potential associates and recognized members to commit illegal acts to pledge allegiance and ongoing alignment to the group. Several different types of gangs exist, including prison, street, and outlaw motorcycle, with some groups being much more violent than others. For example, Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 gang crimes are not primarily petty nuisance crimes; since 2012, of 500 cases reviewed by the Center of Immigration Studies, 207 MS-13 members were charged with murder. Additionally, more than 100 were accused of conspiracy/racketeering and dozens of others for drug trafficking, sex trafficking, attempted murder, sexual assaults, and extortion (Vaughan 2018).

### **Revenge**

Synonymous with retaliation and retribution, revenge is an act of justice. Born from passion, revenge motivates individuals to hurt or harm someone for a perceived injustice. Though it is often associated with love triangles, revenge manifests itself in other relationships and environments. One prevalent and increasingly violent form of revenge renders itself in workplace violence. Some 2 M American workers are victims of workplace violence each year, and of note, in

2014, 16% of all workplace deaths were attributed to work-related attacks (National Safety Council 2018). Criminal acts of revenge in the workplace may include harassing or indecent communications, physical assault, or murder.

Though revenge is generally associated with adult behavior, it also occurs naturally within youth. Findings from a recent study conducted on 5,373 youth indicate that approximately one-half of interpersonal assaults were motivated by revenge and that a significant proportion (10–20%) of running away from home and vandalism incidents were also related to revenge (Kivivuori et al. 2016).

### **Greed/Money**

Greed refers to the desire to always want more, yearning to fulfill some type of unsatisfied state of mind. Individuals experience greed in several aspects of life, one example being with financial gain. In this sense, greed may manifest itself in an addictive state and result in habitual gambling or with petty crime, i.e., larcenies, thefts, burglary, or robbery.

In regard to business and politics, greed often leads to corruption. For example, Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and Freddie Mac were all big businesses that suffered great scandal after executives and leadership were the subjects of white-collar crime accusations. Recent studies have found that other factors, in addition to greed, may also motivate white-collar criminals to commit fraudulent acts. One major concept is that of convenience; that “convenience is a relative concept where white-collar crime is chosen over legitimate actions when there is a strong economical motive, ample organizational opportunities, and acceptance of deviant behavior” (Gottschalk 2018).

### **Drugs and Alcohol**

Though drugs and alcohol are not direct motivations associated with crime, their effects on the human mind may trigger certain responses that ultimately lead to criminal behavior. In fact, approximately 80% of offenses leading to incarceration in the United States involve alcohol

or drugs (NCADD n.d.). Drug offenses may include possession, distribution, specialized distribution offenses, improperly obtaining drugs from those in legal possession, drug crimes against children, and conspiracy. Alcohol offenses may include minor in possession, unlawful transportation, public drinking, driving while intoxicated, and operating under the influence.

Individuals with an addiction to drugs or alcohol are more likely to be involved with rapacious crimes. In 2016, 11.5 M people misused prescription opioids, and 116 people died every day from opioid-related drug overdoses (USDHHS n.d.). To score a fix, users may result to larceny, shoplifting, breaking and entering, and robbery. In more serious cases, addicts may solicit themselves or commit homicide for drugs.

### Love

Even love renders itself in crime. Incidents may derive from domestic disputes, non-intimate partner domestic violence, familial arguments, and disagreements with friends. Some of the most horrific incidents that are perceived as acts of love are murder-suicides. More than 1,300 people died in murder-suicides in America in 2017, and during a 6-month period, 42 homicide victims were less than 18 years of age (Violence Policy Center 2018). Murder-suicide triggers may include money troubles, recent separation or divorce, custody battles, and ongoing domestic violence.

Another crime committed out of perceived love is a type of medical child abuse when a caregiver imposes a fictitious illness on a victim. This act of medical child abuse is referred to as Munchausen syndrome by proxy. By imposing a disorder on a child, the caregiver, generally the mother, feels appreciated and needed. A recent study analyzed 796 perpetrators from case reports and case series and concluded that “mothers with a personal history of childhood maltreatment, obstetric complications, and/or factitious disorder are at heightened risk for medical child abuse” (Yates and Bass 2017). By evaluating the medical history of potential perpetrators, investigators can better understand probable motives.

### Conclusion

Inherently, certain crimes are linked to certain motives. Though motives may be predictive of crimes, not every crime is a result of one single motive. In fact, various motives may lead to one particular crime. For example, a gang member may commit murder on a rival gang member on behalf of the affiliated gang and because of a personal need for revenge. Or a habitual drug user may be a suspect in a domestic violence incident resulting from a disagreement. For this reason, it is essential that security professionals and law enforcement understand criminal motives, as motives tell the crime story.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Criminals](#)
- ▶ [Criminals: White Collar Crimes](#)
- ▶ [Investigations: Criminal](#)
- ▶ [Investigations: Drug Use](#)
- ▶ [Law: Criminal](#)
- ▶ [Workplace Violence: Assault](#)

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