

## Review Article

## Deviant Behavior as a Mental Reactive Coping Defense Mechanism

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**Abstract:** Deviant behavior refers to actions, thoughts, or reactions that violate established social norms, rules, or expectations within a given cultural context (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967/2019). It ranges from mild nonconformity to serious criminal acts and is often shaped by poor family orientation and socialization, peer influence, and psychological factors that necessitate professional intervention such as counselling (Akers, 2004; Bandura, 1977). Crime represents a formal subset of deviance, involving violations of codified laws and punishable by the state (Didwal, 2021). This paper examines deviance and chronic criminality through an integrative lens that foregrounds offender psychology, socialization processes, labeling dynamics, and the reactionary cycle of recidivism (Silver, 2021). Drawing on sociological and psychological theories, the authors argue that habitual deviance is multifactorial; emerging from the interaction of individual traits, early socialization, and environmental contexts (Wheeler, 1961; Kituse, 1962). The paper further explores how stigma and institutional responses may reinforce deviant identities, particularly in educational and correctional settings, thereby undermining rehabilitation and social reintegration (Goffman, 1963; Valenty, 2021).

**Keywords:** Deviance, Criminal Tendency, Crime, Habitual Offender, Labeling, Socialization.

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### INTRODUCTION

Deviance encompasses behaviors that depart from socially accepted norms and expectations, ranging from minor unconventional conduct to serious violations (Becker, 1963). Crime, by contrast, is a legally defined subset of deviance involving breaches of formal laws and punishable by the state (Didwal, 2021). While all crimes are deviant, not all deviance constitutes crime (Lemert, 1967/2019). Deviance is context - dependent, varying across cultures, situations, and historical periods, and is typically managed through informal sanctions such as ridicule, social exclusion, or disapproval (Goffman, 1963). Crime attracts formal sanctions including fines, probation, or imprisonment.

Crime has persisted throughout human history, and efforts to eradicate it entirely have proven ineffective. Durkheim conceptualized crime as a natural social phenomenon linked to societal organization and development (as cited in Didwal, 2021). Individuals may engage in repeated criminal acts; recidivism often explained by the interaction of personal responsibility, learned behavior, and structural constraints (McCurtis, 2021; Silver, 2021). This paper situates habitual deviance

within classic and contemporary theoretical frameworks to elucidate the mechanisms that sustain chronic offending.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance and Crime

Social Learning Theory posits that deviant behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement when perceived rewards outweigh costs (Bandura, 1977; Akers, 2004). Building on Sutherland's differential association, subcultural theory, differential opportunity theory, and the concept of drift, this perspective emphasizes how peer groups transmit techniques, values, and rationalizations for rule-breaking (Cohen *et al.*, 1977/1998; Cloward & Ohlin, 2019/2025; Matza, 1964/2019).

Merton's strain perspective suggests that when legitimate means to achieve culturally prescribed goals are blocked, individuals may turn to deviant adaptations. Labeling Theory further shifts analytical focus from the act to societal reactions, arguing that formal labeling can transform primary deviance into secondary deviance by reshaping identity and opportunity structures (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967/2019). Together, these theories underscore that habitual deviance is rarely monocausal

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but reflects cumulative influences across developmental stages and social contexts.

### **Psychology of the Habitual Offender**

Habitual offenders (recidivists) often display entrenched psychological traits such as impulsivity, low self-control, diminished empathy, emotional instability, and cognitive distortions that justify criminal conduct (Akers, 2004; Bartol & Bartol, 2024). Many adopt crime as a lifestyle rather than an episodic lapse, exhibiting patterns consistent with antisocial personality traits, narcissism, aggression, and a desire for control (Hare, 1993/1999; Baron, 2021).

Early onset delinquency frequently evolves into chronic adult offending, particularly when reinforced by environmental and institutional factors (Rosenberg *et al.*, 1978). While some offenders present with diagnosable mental disorders or trauma-related distress, others are not clinically abnormal but have normalized criminality through repeated reinforcement (Kaplan, 1980). Institutionalization may further entrench criminal identities by fostering dependence on prison routines and facilitating the diffusion of criminal skills (Wheeler, 1961). Evidence suggests that cognitive behavioral interventions, mental health treatment, and incentive-based behavioral programs are among the most effective strategies for disrupting criminal thinking patterns (Bonta & Andrews, 2024).

### **Socialization of Deviant Behavior**

Deviance is socially learned through sustained interaction with family members, peers, and communities that model, reward, and normalize antisocial conduct (Wheeler, 1961). Differential Association Theory highlights the importance of frequency, duration, and intensity of exposure to pro-criminal definitions (Kituse, 1962). Peer groups function as developmental niches where deviant norms are transmitted through imitation, reinforcement, and direct training (Demeter & Rusu, 2019).

Structural conditions; poverty, limited educational and economic opportunities, and weak institutional supervision; create environments conducive to deviance by constraining legitimate options and increasing exposure to criminal models (Becker, 1963). Adolescence represents a critical period, as the need for belonging heightens susceptibility to peer pressure, establishing trajectories of persistent antisocial behavior (Rosenberg *et al.*, 1978; D'Urso *et al.*, 2021).

### **Labeling, Identity, and Secondary Deviance**

Labeling processes can fundamentally alter self-concept by converting an individual who commits a deviant act into one who internalizes a deviant identity (Becker, 1963). Once publicly labeled, individuals may experience stigma, reduced self-esteem, and restricted access to employment, housing, and social support (Goffman, 1963; Valenty, 2021). The label can become a

master status that eclipses other social roles, fostering a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued offending (Bartol & Bartol, 2024).

Primary deviance refers to initial rule-breaking without identity transformation; secondary deviance emerges when societal reactions compel individuals to adopt deviant identities as coping or defensive strategies (Lemert, 1967/2019). Not all individuals accept labels; strong social support and restorative responses can mitigate internalization and facilitate reintegration (Kaplan, 1980; Valenty, 2022).

### **The Reactionary Cycle and Recidivism**

The reactionary cycle of recidivism reflects a self-perpetuating loop of stigma, limited opportunities, and reoffending (Silver, 2021). Socioeconomic disadvantage, untreated mental health and substance use disorders, and under-resourced correctional systems impede rehabilitation (Nickerson, 2025). Post-release barriers discrimination, unemployment, and housing instability, often compel individuals to revert to familiar criminal strategies (Begontes *et al.*, 2024).

Overcrowded prisons that prioritize punishment over rehabilitation may exacerbate recidivism by mixing first-time and chronic offenders and failing to provide education or vocational training (Wheeler, 1961). Evidence indicates that participation in rehabilitative programs, aging, and supportive social networks reduce reoffending risks (Silver, 2021). Breaking the cycle requires a shift toward individualized, holistic, and restorative approaches (Nickerson, 2025).

### **Implications for Policy, Education, and Counseling**

Deviant behavior significantly disrupts educational environments and undermines academic performance, necessitating early identification and counselling-based interventions (Valenty, 2021). Criminal justice systems should balance incapacitation with rehabilitation, tailoring responses to offense severity and offender profiles (Bonta & Andrews, 2024).

Effective policy prioritizes evidence-based interventions addressing root causes; poverty, trauma, addiction, and mental health; while minimizing stigmatizing practices that entrench deviant identities (Goffman, 1963; Nickerson, 2025). Shaming the act rather than the actor and facilitating structured reintegration are associated with lower recidivism (Valenty, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

Conclusively, deviance and crime are complex, context-dependent phenomena shaped by psychological traits, socialization processes, and societal reactions (Becker, 1963; Akers, 2004). Habitual offending reflects the convergence of individual vulnerabilities and structural constraints, often intensified by labeling and institutional responses (Lemert, 1967/2019; Silver,

2021). Reducing recidivism requires moving beyond punitive measures toward comprehensive, individualized rehabilitation that promotes social inclusion, mental health, and economic stability (Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Future efforts should distinguish between violent career offenders and individuals trapped in cycles of minor recurring offenses, ensuring proportional, humane, and effective responses.

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