

Psychosocial Causes of Crime; Offender as Victim. Post-Soviet Georgian Perspective



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ABSTRACT: This study explores the psychosocial causes of crime, particularly focusing on the unique socio-cultural context of post-Soviet Georgia. It examines how offenders can be both perpetrators and victims due to tough environments. It shows how socio-economic issues and the breakdown of traditional support systems influence criminal behavior. This study explores the experiences and motivations behind criminal behavior among older individuals in post-Soviet Georgia. It aims to understand how the collapse of socio-economic structures and the influence of criminal subcultures contributed to the rise in crime during this period. Using mixed approach, the study combines a thorough literature review with in-depth interviews of 12 men aged 35 to 50, who were convicted of violent crimes in Georgia during and shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The findings suggest that economic hardship, social stigmatization, and the appeal of criminal subcultures were major drivers of criminal behavior. Many participants pointed to tough economic conditions, societal pressures, and a feeling of learned helplessness as key factors behind their actions. The study also highlights the long-lasting effects of early stigmatization and the socio-economic challenges faced during the post-Soviet era. The study concludes that to effectively address criminal behavior, it's essential to create comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs. These programs should address both psychological and biological factors, provide economic support, build social networks, and offer trauma-informed care. There's a clear need for targeted interventions that not only prevent crime but also help former offenders reintegrate into society.

KEY WORDS: Criminal behavior, Victimization, Rehabilitation, Strain Theory, Shame Theory, Social learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

Crime is something the law sees as harmful and not normal. Different sciences have various ideas about why people behave badly—some say it's because of their environment or biology. But crime is also a social construct that changes depending on culture, society, and history. What one society considers a crime might be perfectly acceptable in another. Although crime is generally seen the same way in different societies, the influence of family, friends, schools, media, and other social institutions plays a huge role in whether someone follows the law. These influences shape our values, norms, and attitudes toward the law, which can lead someone to become either law-abiding or criminal (Kitoshvili, 2023).

Understanding why people commit crimes is crucial for creating effective prevention and rehabilitation strategies (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). By studying the causes of crime, we can better plan ways to prevent it before it happens and reduce the chances of re-offending when it does (Kitoshvili, 2020). Research (Widom, 1989; Greenfield et al., 1998) shows that one major cause of crime is experience, especially a history of violence in childhood. This includes physical, moral, and psychological trauma, as well as sexual abuse. Also, researchers (Jennings et al., 2012) highlight the complex mix of factors that lead someone to commit crimes, including trauma, violence, social disadvantage, and mental health issues.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the collapse of the Soviet Union significantly impacted how law enforcement and society viewed crime and criminal behavior. During this period, the criminal subculture known as "thieves in law" emerged prominently. This group of organized criminals followed a strict code of conduct originating from Soviet prisons. Sometimes, this subculture was romanticized and seen as a model for young people struggling with education and social welfare. At other times, society distanced itself from these values. This view may have pushed these individuals toward crime by glorifying illegal activities and providing a sense of identity and belonging within the criminal subculture. The lack of education and socioeconomic strength

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made them particularly vulnerable, further entrenching them in this criminal lifestyle.s (Behrens, 2012). These shifting perceptions are reflected in the periodic crime reports from the National Statistics Center of Georgia.¹

This research is based on the perspective that older criminals (millennials) turned to crime because they were victims of poor environments, social disadvantages, existing moral norms, and economic situations. Many grew up in unstable families, had poor education, and limited psycho-social support opportunities. After the Soviet Union collapsed, they lost their support systems and turned to crime to survive (Widom, 1989; Greenfield & Snell, 1999; Kaiser, 2022; Slade, 2013; Lobjanidze & Ghlonti, 2004).

It's well-known that most crimes are committed by teenagers and young adults (Moffitt, 1993). Georgia's Juvenile Justice Strategy, implemented in 2016, successfully reduced the number of teenagers in conflict with the law (Kakulia, 2018). However, while much attention has been given to this younger group, the older generation—those who turned to crime after the Soviet Union collapsed and ended up in prison—have been largely ignored. These individuals still struggle with reintegration into society (Pechkova, 2018).

This period not only led to an increase in criminal activities but also left many older individuals struggling with the reintegration process, as the collapse of established support systems and the rise of criminal subcultures created additional barriers to successful reintegration into a rapidly changing society (Jghenti & Makharadze, 2014).

This research aims to investigate the experiences and motivations behind the criminal behavior of older individuals who turned to crime in the post-Soviet era. It seeks to understand how the collapse of traditional support systems, socio-economic challenges, and the influence of criminal subcultures contributed to their criminal activities.

By examining their socio-cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, the research intends to provide insights that could inform effective prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. This approach involves a comprehensive review of existing literature combined with qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving criminal behavior among Post Soviet Georgia.

1.METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

At the first stage of research there were analyzed theoretical and empirical frame work of crimes. During this crime as a psychological and social phenomenon is explained by a number of theories. Some of them rely on dispositional variables to explain crime, while others rely on situational variables. This literature review reflects the influence of social environment in criminal behaviour, with what can be explained raised criminality mentality in 90s in georgia. Although the focus on this mentality has varied over time, it remains essential to address it through comprehensive reforms in policing, judiciary, and social policies.

In the second stage, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 men, aged 35-50 , convicted of violent crimes. The average duration of the interviews was 30-50 minutes. The issues to be studied were formulated as questions within the framework of the desk research and related to the relationship between crime and victimization, the reasons for involvement in criminal activity, and the importance of having victim services in correctional institutions.

The narratives obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis, and the main themes were identified: Causes of Crime, Influence of Public Opinion and Stigmatization, Victimization and Criminal Behavior, and the Role of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs. Subsequently, the need for different interventions to break the cycle of victimization and crime was identified.

2.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.1 Desk Research

Based on research interests, we reviewed the following theories and researches to explain the causes of crime:

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that individuals learn criminal behavior by observing, imitating, and reinforcing the behavior of people important to them. Family, peers, and other social institutions in which a person grows up are important. In an environment where law-breaking is encouraged and/or carried out by a respected person, it becomes a model for others to follow in similar cases.

Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) posits that individuals engage in crime when there is a discrepancy between their desire to succeed and the resources to succeed. When society places more demands on its members without equipping them with the means to meet these demands legally, a person feels a sense of tension and may turn to alternative (illegal) ways to achieve their goals. Tensions can be caused by unequal resources, socioeconomic status, and/or discrimination.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) asserts that children who lack affection and struggle to bond with others are more likely to become delinquents. In middle childhood, securely attached children generally regulate emotions better, although responses to stress can vary (**Barbieri et al., 2019**). Securely attached kids recovering positive emotions well after stress. In contrast, avoidant

¹ Geostat. (n.d.). *Criminal justice statistics*. National Statistics Office of Georgia. Retrieved July 29, 2024, from <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/132/criminal-justice-statistics>

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children exhibited diminished emotional responses, although ambivalent children are more reactive and fraught with autonomic regulation. Negative emotions from life strains can lead to crime as a coping mechanism. Securely attached children typically manage emotions better, while avoidant and ambivalent children may struggle more, increasing their risk of criminal behavior (Abtahi & Kerns, 2017).

Shame Theory of Stigmatization and Reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989) posits, that evaluation received in childhood becomes the basis for the formation of identity, and sometimes the negative evaluation, even when said for no reason, provokes corresponding behavior in the future.

These theories fit well with our study because they help explain why crime surged in post-Soviet Georgia. Social Learning Theory shows how criminal behavior can be learned from influential people around us, Strain Theory highlights how economic and social pressures can push people toward crime, and Shame Theory explains how early negative evaluations can shape future behavior. Together, they provide a comprehensive look at how the unique challenges of this period influenced criminal behavior.

In support of the theories explaining crime, several studies identify both dispositional variables (such as gender, age, genetics, and personal characteristics) and situational variables (including environment, demographic factors, and culture) as causes of criminal behavior. To support the theoretical framework used in this research, it is important to consider how situational variables affect criminal behavior and vary across different socio-cultural contexts. Among them are:

Physical Environment: Refers to urbanization and/or architectural planning. For example, violent crimes are more often committed by teenagers living in apartment buildings than by residents of private houses. This phenomenon is revealed by the gloomy, unimaginative, cold, and dangerous exterior of high-rise buildings (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Shalikhvili's book of criminology (Shalikhvili, 2012) cites studies proving that the emotion of broken stairs, disarray, and damaged interiors in old buildings causes frustration among residents. Added to this is the feeling of anonymity (in multi-story buildings), lack of security, and the risk of expressing aggressive behavior.

Social Environment: For example, the neighborhood can influence an individual's risk of engaging in criminal behavior. Research has shown that living in high-crime neighborhoods with limited access to quality education, health care, and recreational facilities can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and social disorganization, which in turn are conducive to crime (Wikström & Treiber, 2007). Also, studies prove that living with deviant peers or in a dysfunctional family can provoke deviant actions and lead to involvement in criminal behavior (Akers & Jensen, 2003). Socio-economic inequalities such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education are strongly associated with crime. Studies show that people in lower social status are more likely to commit crime, as frustration caused by economic deprivation often leads to criminal actions (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Additionally, family dysfunction and/or living in a single-parent family are often associated with a higher likelihood of a child growing up to engage in criminal behavior (Steden et al., 2012; Weijer et al., 2014).

In the 1990s, Georgia, like many countries breaking free from Soviet rule, faced a tough period. After declaring independence in April 1991, the country was thrust into a whirlwind of violence and poverty, dealing with separatist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This instability weakened the Georgian government and led to widespread corruption and economic collapse (Slade, 2013). The end of Soviet rule created a power vacuum that criminal networks quickly moved in to fill. As the economy declined and unemployment soared, traditional social structures fell apart, giving organized crime a chance to grow stronger (Kaiser, 2022). During this chaotic time, groups like the "Mkhedrioni" and "the National Guard" were known for their violent actions. At the same time, the criminal elite, often referred to as "thieves in law," gained considerable influence both inside and outside of prison. This group, which had its own strict code, continued to wield significant power in organized crime after the Soviet collapse. They not only celebrated illegal activities but also provided a sense of identity and community, which could lure individuals into criminal behavior (Slade, 2013; Lobjanidze & Ghlonti, 2004).

Criminal subculture didn't start with the Soviet era. Harsh conditions in early Soviet prisons forced many into criminal networks for survival. When these individuals rejoined society, they often mingled with criminals, adopting their ways and language. Traditional values against theft were weakened by 20th-century upheavals and communist rule, allowing criminal elements to become more influential and reshape local culture. This mindset even affected the Soviet Army, linking military and criminal records with masculinity—a concept still present in modern Russian society (Ter-Gabrielyan et al., 2020).

During the past decades, there was a period when Georgia fought the criminal subculture with special strategies. There were major police reforms and efforts to isolate "thieves in law" from other prisoners. While this approach helped reduce the interaction between new offenders and criminal elements, it also led to a rise in criminal records due to harsh measures against violence and petty crimes. But, after period changed and a wave of prisoner amnesties has caused a slight uptick in petty crime. Still, the core principles against criminal behavior persist. A notable example of resistance came in last years, when some politicians argued that a proposed amendment was a "genocide of Georgian youth," suggesting that criminal subculture was rooted in traditional Caucasian values (Grigoryan, 2024). These unique challenges faced by older individuals who turned to crime during the post-Soviet era has disrupted support networks on their reintegration (Jghenti, 2011).

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1.2 Qualitative study

In the second stage, the research focused on the causes of violent crimes committed by individuals sentenced in Georgia during and shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, investigating various dimensions. Their responses were grouped into a few thematic categories:

1.1.1. Causes of Crime

Economic hardship emerged as a predominant factor driving individuals towards criminal activities. Interviewees commonly linked their criminal behavior to the tough economic conditions they faced and the social environment of the 1990s.

Economic Factors: Many respondents attributed their criminal involvement to poor economic conditions. One interviewee mentioned,

“Several factors led to my involvement in criminal activities, primarily the environment during my adolescence, which made criminal behavior seem appealing. My father’s criminal background also played a role” (Male, 41 years old).

Social Influence: The impact of social acceptance of criminal behavior was evident. For instance, another respondent noted, “I had a tendency towards crime from childhood. If I had a better economic situation, I might have chosen a different path. My achievements in wrestling were undervalued, which demotivated me” (Male, 40 years old).

Addiction to Crime: A significant number of interviewees expressed a deeper connection to crime, with one stating, “If I were in a better financial situation, I might reduce my criminal activities, but I’m somewhat addicted to crime” (Male, 38 years old).

1.1.2. Influence of Public Opinion and Stigmatization

Public attitudes and stigmatization were found to have a considerable impact on criminal behavior and identity.

Social Labeling: Stigmatization affected individuals' choices and self-perception. One respondent explained, “Changing anything would be seen as a weakness. The public label I carry prevents me from other activities” (Male, 41 years old).

Material Perceptions: Another interviewee noted,

“Today, without money, many opportunities are closed off. Material possessions can influence how others perceive you, but ultimately, your mental resources matter” (Male, 40 years old).

Fear of Stigmatization: Fear of being labeled negatively influenced criminal behavior. One person mentioned,

“I committed a serious crime to avoid being labeled ‘weak’” (Male, 39 years old).

1.1.3. Victimization and Criminal Behavior

Although interviewees did not directly identify themselves as victims, their experiences suggest a connection between victimization and crime.

Economic Struggles: Economic difficulties and social conditions were frequently linked to criminal behavior. For example, one interviewee stated,

“I committed my first crime because my brother couldn’t earn money and I had to rob someone” (Male, 35 years old).

Social Pressures: Another respondent connected their criminal behavior to social pressures, saying,

“I wouldn’t call it victimization, but the difficult social situation influenced my life. I remember stealing to buy gifts for my girlfriend” (Male, 41 years old).

1.1.4. Role of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs were recognized as vital for addressing the psychosocial needs of individuals involved in crime.

Program Importance: There was a consensus on the need for effective rehabilitation programs. One respondent emphasized,

“Such programs are crucial but need improvement. They should be approached like drug addiction treatment, focusing on healing rather than punishment” (Male, 41 years old).

Positive Effects: Despite not personally using these programs, some respondents acknowledged their positive impact on others. One noted,

“Even if they help only 10 out of 100, they are worth supporting” (Male, 40 years old).

Effective Interventions: Effective programs should provide opportunities for reform and future employment. As one interviewee suggested,

“Effective programs should offer ways for reform and future employment opportunities, tailored to the type of criminal involved” (Male, 33 years old).

3. FINDINGS

For explain these results, we need take into account, that societal shifts post-Soviet collapse may have exacerbated childhood trauma, resulting in a persistent pattern of criminal behavior among those with adverse formative experiences. Insecure attachment was strongly associated with all types of criminality. (Ogilvie, 2014) (Interviews revealed that negative public perception and stigmatization significantly influenced respondents' choices and self-perception, often reinforcing their criminal identity as a form

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of self-defense or reaction to learned helplessness. In Georgian society, where criminal subcultures have been positively reinforced and romanticized, juveniles may prefer to affiliate with these groups for a sense of belonging rather than seeking healthier socialization options. This affiliation can lead to a mindset where breaking the rules has been perceived as "Sigma" further entrenching them in criminal behavior (Karpman, 2020).

Also, from a neurobiological perspective, individuals who experienced significant trauma and socio-economic instability may have had disrupted vagal tone, leading to difficulties in regulating their emotional states and social interactions. This dysregulation can manifest in a diminished capacity for empathy, increased aggression, and a propensity for antisocial behavior. The inability to feel safe and connected to others could result in a heightened state of defensiveness and a tendency to view oneself as a victim, perpetuating a cycle of criminal behavior (van der Kolk, 2021).

Additionally, generations that grew up in the Post-Soviet era were particularly vulnerable to adopting a criminal mindset. The disintegration of societal norms and economic hardship not only fostered a culture of crime but also ingrained a sense of victimhood and defiance against societal rules. As these individuals engaged in criminal activities, they often viewed themselves as victims of their circumstances, further justifying their actions and perpetuating the cycle of crime (Lankina, 2022).

The study underscores the relevance of Strain Theory in explaining the rise in crime during this period. The socio-economic pressures faced by many Georgians pushed them toward illegal means of survival. The disintegration of traditional support systems and the emergence of criminal subcultures in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse created a fertile ground for criminal behavior, especially among those who experienced economic hardship and social dislocation. This research supports also, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Shame Theory (Braithwaite, 1989) by demonstrating how experiences of abuse, neglect, and early stigmatization shape behavior and identity, leading to a negative self-image and perception of others.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research aimed to explore the experiences and motivations behind the criminal behavior of older individuals who turned to crime in the post-Soviet era, focusing on the collapse of traditional support systems, socio-economic challenges, and criminal subcultures. The findings reveal that the economic hardship and social stigmatization that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with the resulting lack of support and the influence of criminal subcultures, played significant roles in driving criminal behavior among this demographic. The dismantling of the Soviet social structure left many without the security and identity they once had, making them more vulnerable to engaging in criminal activities as a means of survival or belonging.

Despite the fact that the situation has changed, the results of the study provide insights that can help prevent similar patterns in the future, especially among adolescents, who are the future of society. Accordingly, the study considers it appropriate to issue the following recommendation:

To effectively address and prevent criminal behavior, it is essential to develop comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs. These programs should address both the psychosocial and neurobiological aspects of criminal behavior by providing economic support, fostering supportive social networks, incorporating trauma-informed care, enhancing emotional regulation through stress-reduction techniques, offering education and vocational training, and creating community programs that provide alternative pathways and a sense of belonging for youth.

5. LIMITATIONS AND PLANS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study has a few important considerations to take into account. While the findings offer valuable insights, they are drawn from a relatively small sample of 12 men, which may not capture the full range of criminal behavior from the post-Soviet era. The focus on a specific type of crime might limit the generalizability of the results to other criminal activities that could have different underlying causes and motivations. Additionally, since the data comes from self-reported interviews, the findings are influenced by the participants' personal perspectives and willingness to share sensitive information.

Future research could broaden the scope by including a wider variety of crime types, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of criminal behavior in this context.

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