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## STREET CRIME ISN'T RANDOM - IT IS BUILT LONG BEFORE THE CRIME HAPPENS

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### ABSTRACT

*Street crime has become a major concern in urban India, and there has been a marked rise in the participation of youth in crimes like snatching, pick-pocketing, theft, assault, and vandalism. This pattern not only indicates an increase in criminality but also underlying structural and behavioural problems in society. The current analysis examines the underlying factors contributing to youth involvement in street-level crimes in an urban setting using a criminological approach, rather than a strictly legal one. The paper presents various causes that relate to this phenomenon. The economic strain, especially unemployment and underemployment by educated young people, leads to frustration and relative deprivation, which can lead to illegitimate ways of survival. Another important aspect is peer group influence, whereby when an individual associates with delinquent groups, the minor offences tend to be normalized, and with time, individuals tend to engage in more hardcore criminal activities. It is exacerbated by substance abuse, which affects judgment, self-control, and impulsivity. Also, family breakdown and reduced emotional supervision in urban areas lead to a deficit in moral management and social control among young people. The increasing power of media and social media, which tend to promote material achievement and high-end living, promotes unrealistic hopes and a rush to success. Anonymity in cities and overpopulated urban settings also diminishes social responsibility, making opportunistic crimes easier to get away with without facing direct repercussions. This analysis concludes that youth participation in street crime is mostly circumstantial and a result of a mix of socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors. It is not only a personal deviance but a sign of more systemic problems. The paper highlights that a holistic strategy incorporating job availability, educational and counselling services, enhanced family and community support structures, and rehabilitative strategies in the criminal justice system should be adopted.*

**Keywords:** *Youth Street Crime, Urban Criminology, Socio-Economic Factors, Peer Influence, Substance Abuse*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

It was a Monday evening at a crowded metro station. It was peak time and the metro was fully crowded. People were in a hurry, heading in and out, their phones were out, and in a blink of a second you realize that your phone has been snatched. The crowd reacts furiously, the victim is frozen, and the thief very quickly disappears. Another incident, another statistic. When the offender is caught, the reality that we come across is completely unexpected. They do not turn out to be hardened criminals, nor a part of an organized group, but a young person, sometimes a teenager.

This is someone who does not begin with a criminal mindset but has been led to such a position to involve in street crimes due to influence, pressure, and a series of small decisions that went unnoticed.

So, the real question isn't just what happened but why young people are getting involved or are being pulled into street crimes in the first place.

## **II. STREET CRIME IS NOT JUST CRIME IT'S A SOCIAL STIGMA**

Street crime refers to theft, mobile snatching, pick pocketing, assault, and vandalism that take place on the streets. These acts are generally impulsive rather than planned, driven by immediate gain, and concentrated in urban environments.

In many cities, a growing number of young first-time offenders are now involved in street theft, mobile snatching, and similar offences rather than professional criminals. This indicates that petty theft is not only a matter of law enforcement but also a broader social issue influenced by underlying pressures.

### **When Efforts Stop Feeling Rewarding**

A major factor contributing to youth involvement in street crime is economic disenfranchisement. Many young people are educated but underemployed or unemployed, which leads to frustration, helplessness, and dependency. A significant gap exists between their expectations and real-life opportunities.

When sustained effort does not produce results, individuals begin to feel that legitimate paths are ineffective. In such conditions, unlawful actions may appear less unacceptable. Street crime in these cases becomes more about survival or quick gain rather than deliberate criminal intent.

"Getting ahead" and this becomes one of the important causes of youth indulging in street crimes.

### **Peer Pressure: Where It Usually Starts**

Many young offenders are introduced to criminal behaviour through peer groups. The process often begins not with crime but with social acceptance. Initial participation is encouraged through statements such as "just come once," "nothing will happen," or "everyone does it."

Over time, repeated exposure normalizes such behaviour. Small steps gradually escalate into repeated involvement, and individuals may eventually reach a point where withdrawal becomes difficult. Peer influence plays a significant role in activities such as theft, snatching, robbery, and vandalism, often targeting unsuspecting individuals or public property.

### **Drugs and "Whim Crimes"**

Most street crimes are unplanned. They occur in a state of diminished self-control. Drugs and alcohol do not directly create the intention to commit crime; however, they significantly reduce the ability to exercise self-control. Under their influence, individuals lose control over their actions, and intoxication further leads to excessive loss of temper, which may result in harm to themselves or others.

Some of the outcomes include increased impulsivity, reduced fear of consequences, and a diminished sense of responsibility, where outcomes and legal consequences feel distant or irrelevant in the moment. In such situations, a single poor decision can lead to serious legal repercussions, often made under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

### **The Silence within Families**

Absence within families is not always physical; it can also be emotional in nature. When young individuals lack communication, guidance, and emotional support within their families, they tend to seek support elsewhere.

Unfortunately, this "elsewhere" is not always safe and may expose them to negative influences or risky peer groups. Over time, this lack of emotional grounding can increase vulnerability to inappropriate behaviour and criminal influences.

### **III. THE ILLUSION OF FAST SUCCESS**

Social media often highlights outcomes rather than effort. Success appears instant, money appears easy, and everyone seems ahead. This creates silent pressure, comparison, and dissatisfaction with personal progress.

When real-life progress feels slow, shortcuts begin to appear more attractive, even when they are illegal or unethical. In such cases, individuals may justify unlawful actions for the purpose of quick financial gain.

Thus, while social media provides multiple opportunities for growth and exposure, it also contributes to unrealistic expectations. In some cases, this creates a distorted perception of success where money is earned through unethical or illegal means, reflecting a negative influence of the digital environment.

#### **Cities without Accountability**

Urban life offers both opportunity and anonymity. In crowded urban environments, people are often disconnected, actions are less visible, and accountability appears weaker. This reduced sense of visibility lowers psychological hesitation toward engaging in risky or unlawful behaviour.

### **IV. LEGAL PERSPECTIVE: HOW THE LAW TREATS STREET CRIME**

Street crime is not only a social concern but is also punishable under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. Different offences are associated with different levels of punishment.

Theft is punishable with imprisonment up to three years, or fine, or both. Snatching and stealth theft in public spaces are treated seriously due to the fear and insecurity they create in society. Robbery, which involves theft accompanied by violence or threat, may result in rigorous imprisonment up to ten years or more in aggravated cases. Assault committed during the commission of such offences leads to additional punishment and stricter sentencing.

The law primarily focuses on intent, violence, and the impact on public safety. Even actions that may appear “small” in social perception can become serious offences under law depending on their execution and circumstances.

For example, in several urban incidents involving mobile snatching by first-time young offenders, courts have treated such acts not as simple theft but closer to robbery-level offences when force or intimidation was involved, resulting in stricter punishment.

This reflects a key legal principle: crime is defined by law, not perception. Even first-time offenders may face arrest and custody, trial under criminal procedure, imprisonment depending on severity, and a permanent criminal record that affects future opportunities.

## **V. THE DAMAGE GOES BEYOND THE MOMENT**

The impact of street crime extends beyond the immediate incident.

For victims, it leads to fear in public spaces, psychological distress, and a reduced sense of safety. For offenders, consequences include a criminal record, limited employment opportunities, social stigma, and difficulty in reintegration into society.

A few seconds of action can permanently change the lives of both the victim and the offender.

### **Why Punishment Alone Is Not Enough**

Strict legal punishment is necessary but not sufficient, because by the time a crime occurs, the underlying causes are already active.

A more effective response requires employment and skill development opportunities, mental health awareness, early intervention in schools and colleges, stronger family communication, and community-based youth engagement.

Prevention is ultimately more effective than punishment alone.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Street crime does not begin on the street. It begins earlier—in pressure, silence, comparison, and lack of opportunity. By the time it becomes visible, the underlying causes are already in motion. If society responds only after crime occurs, the cycle continues. But if attention is given earlier, many of these incidents can be prevented before they happen. Street crime among the youth in urban India cannot be viewed in isolation, as a simple breach of law. It is an intricate socio-criminal problem based on economic instability, peer pressure, weakening family systems, drug abuse, exposure to media, and anonymity in cities. A combination of these factors results in a situation where young people are susceptible to opportunistic and impulsive criminal behaviour. Criminologically, it is clear that young people's engagement in street crime is not necessarily due to their criminal predisposition but a reaction to the social and structural pressures in the environment.

This points to the shortcomings of a punitive method of crime control. As such, a balanced approach that extends beyond enforcement is necessary to address this issue. Enhancing

employment opportunities, access to quality education and skill development, mental health awareness, and family and community involvement are key preventive strategies. Also, rehabilitative strategies in the criminal justice system can be significant in reintegration of first-time offenders into the community.

Finally, it is necessary to engage the state institutions, families, and communities in a concerted effort to reduce street crime among the youth. The reduction in youth involvement in street crime can only be achieved in the long term by dealing with the causes and not the symptoms.

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