**Theory of differential opportunity**

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin work Delinquency and Opportunity, written more than 50 years ago, combined strain and social disorganization principles to portray a gang-sustaining criminal subculture. The centerpiece of Cloward and Ohlin’s theory is differential opportunity. According to this concept, people in all strata of society share the same success goals; however, those in the lower socioeconomic class have limited means of achieving them. People who perceive themselves as failures within conventional society will seek alternative or innovative ways to succeed. People who conclude that there is little hope for legitimate advancement may join like-minded peers to form a gang, which can provide them with emotional support. The youth who is considered a failure at school and is qualified for only a menial job at the minimum wage can earn thousands of dollars, plus the respect of his or her peers, by joining a gang and taking part in drug deals or armed robberies. Cloward and Ohlin recognize that the opportunity for success in both conventional and criminal careers is limited. In stable areas, adolescents may be recruited by professional criminals, drug traffickers, or organized crime groups. Unstable areas, however, cannot support flourishing criminal opportunities. In these socially disorganized neighborhoods, adult role models are absent, and young criminals have few opportunities to join established gangs or learn the fine points of professional crime. Their most important finding, then, is that all opportunities for success, both illegal and conventional, are closed for the most disadvantaged youths. Because of differential opportunity, young people are likely to join one of three types of gangs.

**Criminal gangs**

These gangs exist in stable neighborhoods where close connections among adolescent, young adult, and adult offenders create an environment for successful criminal enterprise. Youths are recruited into established criminal gangs that provide training for a successful criminal career. Gang membership is a learning experience in which the knowledge and skills needed for success in crime are acquired. During this apprenticeship, older, more experienced members of the criminal subculture hold youthful trainees on tight reins, limiting activities that might jeopardize the gang’s profits (for example, engaging in nonfunctional, irrational violence).

**Conflict gangs**

These gangs develop in communities unable to provide either legitimate or illegitimate opportunities. They attract tough adolescents who fight with weapons to win respect from rivals and engage in unpredictable and destructive assaults on people and property. Conflict gang members must be ready to fight to protect their own and their gang’s integrity and honor. By doing so, they acquire a “rep,” which gains them admiration from their peers and consequently helps them buttress their self-image.

**Retreatist gangs**

Retreatists are double failures, unable to gain success through legitimate means and unwilling to do so through illegal ones. Members of the retreatist subculture constantly search for ways of getting high—alcohol, pot, heroin, unusual sexual experiences, music. To feed their habits, retreatists develop a “hustle”—pimping, conning, selling drugs, or committing petty crimes. Personal status in the retreatist subculture is derived from peer approval.

Cloward and Ohlin’s theory integrates cultural deviance and social disorganization variables and recognizes different modes of criminal adaptation. The fact that criminal cultures can be supportive, rational, and profitable seems to reflect the actual world of the delinquent more realistically than Cohen’s original view of purely negativistic, destructive delinquent youths who reject all social values.