

BEHIND THE HEADLINES: How Criminals Think
Commentary from America's Future, Inc.
Program D-628/January 31, 1996

A noted authority on the criminal mind says it's time to quit finding excuses for the behavior of criminals and start holding them responsible for their actions.

Nick Eicher reporting *Behind The Headlines*.

"When a person commits a particularly sordid crime, his sanity may be questioned," but even the most violent criminal "is rational, calculating, and deliberate in his actions," observes clinical psychologist Stanton Samenow, one of the authors of a new book called *Criminal Justice: The Legal System vs. Individual Responsibility*. "Criminals know right from wrong," Samenow insists. "In fact, some know the laws better than their lawyers. But they believe that whatever they want to do at any given time is right for them. Their crimes require logic and self-control."

Criminals are not "mentally ill," nor should they be excused as "victims of poverty, broken homes, racism, and a society that denies them opportunities," says Samenow. "Sociological explanations for crime, plausible as they may seem, are simplistic. If they were correct, we'd have far more criminals than we do. Criminals come from all kinds of families and neighborhoods. Most poor people are law-abiding, and most kids from broken homes are not delinquents. Children may bear the scars of neglect and deprivation for life, but most do not become criminals."

Rational citizens should reject the self-serving explanations of sociopaths. "Criminals claim that they were rejected by parents, neighbors, schools, and employers," notes Samenow, "but rarely does a criminal say why he was rejected. Even as a young child, he was sneaky and defiant, and the older he grew the more he lied to his parents, stole and destroyed their property, and threatened them." Samenow thinks the more likely explanation is that the criminal "rejected his parents rather than vice versa. Not only did he reject his family, but he rejected the kids in the neighborhood who acted responsibly," voluntarily choosing to associate with other delinquents.

"Despite a multitude of differences in their backgrounds and crime patterns, criminals are alike in one way," says Stanton Samenow. They all think alike, viewing the world as "a chessboard over which they have total control" and looking at people as "pawns to be pushed around at will. Trust, love, loyalty, and teamwork are incompatible with their way of life. They scorn and exploit most people who are kind, trusting, hardworking, and honest."

Society does itself, and the perpetrator, a disservice in excusing criminal behavior. "By taking the position that the criminal is a victim, society has provided him with excuses for crime and thereby supported his contention that he is not to blame." Yet, no matter how many opportunities society offers him for "rehabilitation" and "mainstreaming," the criminal will continue to reject responsibility because that life that has no appeal for him. Why does society insist on making these futile overtures? "A surprising number of people who deal with criminals do not know how criminals think," says Samenow. "How a person behaves is determined largely by how he thinks. *Criminals think differently.*"