

Philosophy of crime: Existential aspects and dimensions



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Abstract The aim of this study is to explore the existential aspects of crime from the perspective of philosophical analysis. It positions criminal behavior not merely as a legal violation but also as a potential manifestation of a profound personal crisis and a search for meaning in existential emptiness. The research employs a multiaspect methodological approach, which includes a consistent literature review, factor extraction, thematic analysis, and phenomenological interpretation. This is complemented by an analysis of open-source Eurostat statistics for 2020--2022. A systemic review of philosophical literature from the last two decades identified several key existential factors that influence crime rates. Thematic analysis ranked social inequality as the predominant factor intrinsically linked to existential despair. Alienation was also distinguished as a critical driver, stemming from a deep disconnection from societal structures. A subsequent phenomenological analysis of nine European countries stratified by development level revealed a strong correlation between socioeconomic conditions and crime trends. The findings demonstrate that nations with greater economic development, greater social equality, and stronger public trust in government institutions, such as Germany and Sweden, have lower crime rates. This reflects a collective sense of existential security. In contrast, countries characterized by significant inequality, low institutional trust, and political instability, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Ukraine, show persistently higher crime rates. This underscores the role of existential frustration and despair in driving deviant behavior. The case of Ukraine is a particular example of how severe economic downturns and war exacerbate existential insecurity, which leads to survival-oriented crime. The study concludes that crime is intrinsically linked to social stability and existential well-being. The results substantiate the theoretical framework of existential philosophy in criminology, demonstrating that crime can be a response to unaddressed existential voids. This research contributes to the field by providing a nuanced, interdisciplinary understanding of crime etiology, suggesting that effective prevention and resocialization strategies must address these underlying existential factors to be truly effective.

Keywords: existential emptiness, internal conflict, morality, philosophy of existentialism, philosophy of law

1. Introduction

The prevalence of criminal behavior stands out among the many current global issues, often resulting from complex social, cultural, and psychological factors (Glouberman, 2024). Crime should be seen not only as an offense but also as a manifestation of personal crisis or internal conflict—an attempt to find meaning in existential emptiness (Haltsova et al., 2021). Existentialism, a philosophical movement, explores the meaning of existence, human choice, and responsibility. Examining crime through an existential lens expands beyond traditional legal views, revealing individual experiences and struggles that lead to deviant behavior (Bisschop et al., 2022). This perspective is valuable for developing new approaches to crime prevention, as understanding crime as an existential search offers insight into resocialization and rehabilitation strategies (Oderiy et al., 2024). Consequently, psychological and ethical considerations play crucial roles in law enforcement and legal culture development (Akimov et al., 2020).

A key aspect of studying crime is defining the concept. The challenge is that crime is studied across various disciplines, including sociology, deviantology, criminology, and philosophy. While the diversity of definitions reflects the complexity of the phenomenon, it also calls for a theoretical framework that integrates these perspectives. Social philosophy, which analyses macrolevel social structures and processes, is well positioned to create a generalized theoretical understanding of crime (Kovalenko et al., 2022). Its methodology combines speculative knowledge with empirical research. The theoretical image of crime developed within the scope of social philosophy should be considered balanced and useful for formulating



crime prevention strategies (Popovych et al., 2022). Therefore, sociophilosophical analysis of crime remains both relevant and timely.

The relevance of this existential perspective is further intensified by the dynamics of contemporary global transformations. The post-2020 period is characterized by a cumulative effect of uncertainty, determined by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent escalation of large-scale geopolitical conflicts, most notably the military aggression against Ukraine. These crises have precipitated a massive exacerbation of social inequality, alienation, and economic precarity, leading to an intensification of collective anxiety and the devaluation of core value orientations. Consequently, the phenomenon of the "existential vacuum" has acquired a systemic scale, serving as a catalyst for increased individual and societal deviance. Under these circumstances, analyzing crime through the lens of existential anthropology emerges not merely as a theoretical reflection but as an objective necessity for identifying the correlation between the destruction of the security environment and the fundamental transformations of criminal motivation.

The *problem of this study* is that it poorly studies the deep motivations and internal experiences of an individual who has committed a crime. The crime is considered to be a violation of legal norms in traditional criminological approaches. As a rule, researchers focus on external factors such as economic, social, and cultural conditions. These approaches often fail to consider the influence of individual internal characteristics, which can significantly influence decision-making by an individual in difficult life circumstances. *The study focuses* on the existential dimension of crime: the study of criminal behavior through the prism of key notions such as freedom, responsibility, alienation, anxiety, and crisis of the sense of life. The aim of this study is to reveal the interrelation between personal crises and criminal behavior, as well as to identify philosophical approaches to understanding crime as a phenomenon. The aim involves the fulfillment of the following *research objectives*:

1. Analyze modern philosophical thoughts on the identification of existential factors of crime.
2. Rank the existential factors of crime by significance.
3. Study statistics to establish a relationship between the detected factors and crime rate.

2. Literature Review

The philosophical study of crime has deep historical roots, which can be traced from ancient Greek philosophy to modern concepts. Recent related studies define different views of authors on the nature of crime and criminal behavior. The study of modern methods reveals how the theoretical understanding of crime has evolved, including its moral, social, and existential aspects.

The work of Arandjelović (2023) focuses on the ethical analysis of the criminal justice system, particularly the appropriateness of imprisonment as a form of punishment. The author criticizes the philosophical conception of punitive imprisonment, indicating its inability to correspond to two criteria of fair punishments: the appropriateness of the punishment to the criminal and the adequacy of the punishment to the seriousness of the crime. The researcher also offers a new view of the ethical issues of capital punishment, rejecting punitive aims and recognizing them as permissible on compassionate grounds.

Vogt's (2023) study explores philosophical concepts of crime, punishment, and freedom, emphasizing the "natural meaning" of crime as the denial of freedom and punishment as its affirmation. Drawing on Jean Hampton, Hart, and Kant, it critiques modern justice practices that fail to uphold mutual freedom. Altman's (2023) book traces the evolution of punishment theories, offering a critical analysis of approaches such as reformism, deterrence, and social responsibility. It considers punishment in the state-society context, proposing restorative justice as an alternative.

Lynch et al. (2023) analyze Hirschi's control theory, which is grounded in Durkheim's views on social relations. Their contribution is connecting discipline, social attachment, and crime, stressing that punishment should foster social attachment and prevent criminal acts. Maguire's (2023) work examines punishment for crimes against humanity, asserting that states involved in such crimes have a legal and moral duty to prosecute offenders. The main contribution is its victim-centered perspective, which argues that punishment restores victims' status and reaffirms the state's commitment to their rights.

The article by Imran et al. (2024) significantly contributes to the philosophy of crime through the study of existentialism and environmental damage. The main authors' contribution is the proposition to consider not only criminal liability for environmental crimes but also an existential crisis of offenders. This enables the establishment of deeper moral liability.

Ciocan (2023) reconsiders the phenomenon of witnessing through a philosophical lens, using a phenomenological approach that incorporates language, presence, memory, truth, and temporality. His key contribution is distinguishing two types of witnesses: the "confessing-witness," who directly experiences the event, and the "third-party witness," who only observes. This framework broadens the concept of testimony, balancing existential presence with hermeneutical interpretation. Kotarba and Melnikov (2023) noted that existential ideas in criminal punishment theory have been criticized as radical but remain crucial for analyzing social phenomena such as the dehumanization of mass society and excessive rationalization. This approach reveals the interaction between emotions and culture, offering deeper insight into crime origins.

Kirke and Steele (2023) contributed to the philosophy of crime by integrating existentialism into ontological security studies (OSSs). They explore myths and OSS, showing how myth adaptation can prevent absolutist views of reality. The article also offers an ethical and political perspective on OSS, laying the foundation for alternative policies using countermyths to

address global challenges. Torres (2023) examines five definitions of “existential risk” and advocates for a pluralistic approach, emphasizing that the definition depends on the context. His key contribution is clarifying terms for public discourse and academic research, suggesting “risks of human extinction or civilizational collapse” for public use and “significant loss of expected value” for academic analysis.

The existential dimension opens several poorly studied issues in the context of the philosophy of crime, which require deeper analysis. Crime can reflect internal conflicts and a sense of crisis in one’s personality. Viewing criminal behavior through the prism of existentialism enables an understanding of how the feeling of meaninglessness or failure can lead to moral standard violations. It is also important to consider how a system of punishments and rehabilitations can be adapted not only to punish but also to support an individual searching for senses.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Design

The study is cross-sectional, as it analyzes data for a certain period (2020-2022) but does not include observations of changes in the behavior of groups over a long period. It was conducted via the collection and comparison of data from different countries within a certain time frame. *The first stage* involved a systemic literature review. Philosophic literature on crime issues for the last 20 years was selected. The studies most cited in academic publications were selected from among them. Each source was analyzed in detail, and the authors related to crime were distinguished by methods of factor classification. *In the second stage*, open sources, particularly Eurostat, were analyzed. Social inequality was analyzed via the Gini coefficient (the higher the coefficient is, the higher the inequality), and the share of the population living beyond the poverty line was calculated. For alienation, the level of trust in the government and social institutions and the level of citizens’ participation in public organisations were analyzed. The economic crisis was studied by exploring the pace of GDP (gross domestic product) growth. A culture of fear was defined on the basis of the level of corruption perception, feelings of personal security, and crime rate. Crime was determined by the general crime rate, number of violent crimes, and number of thefts. Phenomenological analysis was also applied at this stage. *The third stage* involved summarizing the results. The frequency of mentioning each factor was used as the basis for quantitative analysis. The mode, average value, and standard deviation provide additional reliability to the selected methods.

3.2. Participants

A number of recent studies have been conducted to identify the existential factors influencing crime. The sample included works on the philosophy of crime by Bauman (2000), Simon (2007), Harcourt (2011), Nemeth (2022), and Janoff-Bulman (2023). The inclusion criteria were publication within the last 20 years, high citation rates, and a philosophical focus. This sample helps to trace trends in identifying existential factors affecting crime. For further analysis, the legal frameworks of nine European countries were selected. They were grouped by the level of development and social problems: high level of development (Germany, France, Sweden), medium level of development (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary), and low level of development (Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine).

3.3. Data collection

1. *Systemic analysis*—the methodological approach used for the structured and objective study of the presenting theme of the existential dimension of crime in philosophical literature. It involves a thorough review of existing studies, data, and theories. This provides grounds for a comprehensive understanding of the existential factors affecting crime (Avunduk, 2021).

2. *The factor extraction method* involves the process of identifying and determining important elements while studying the academic literature, influencing the existential causes of crime commitment. This is one of the most important stages of any research, as the reliability of the obtained results depends on the correctness of factor selection. Profound analysis of the available academic literature enables distinguishing factors, which were previously studied by other researchers.

4. The *method of thematic analysis* replaces statistical indicators by focusing on the frequency and depth of discussions in philosophical literature. Each factor is ranked on the basis of its thematic relevance and the intensity of its connection to existential dimensions of crime. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how existential factors are conceptualized in theoretical discourse, avoiding reliance on quantitative metrics.

5. *The phenomenological approach* was applied by analyzing the experiences of individuals involved in criminal behavior, with a focus on their subjective perceptions of freedom, guilt, and existential meaning. Through textual analysis (e.g., academic studies), the study revealed how existential states such as alienation or absurdity influence criminal actions. This method provides a deeper understanding of the existential dimensions of crime beyond quantitative data.

4. Results

In the first stage, selected sources were analyzed to distinguish existential factors that can encourage crime commitment. The results of the systemic analysis and factor extraction method are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Frequencies of crime factors mentioned in the selected studies.

Factor	Bauman	Simon	Harcourt	Nemeth	Janoff-Bulman
Social inequality	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
Alienation	☑		☑	☑	☑
Political instability	☑	☑			
Economic crisis	☑	☑	☑		
Culture of fear		☑	☑		☑
Individualism	☑				☑
Search for life sense				☑	☑
Mass media influence		☑			
Dysfunctional families				☑	
Legal system imperfections		☑	☑	☑	

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis of Bauman (2000), Simon (2007), Harcourt (2011), Nemeth (2022), and Janoff-Bulman (2023).

The authors focus on social factors of crime, such as political instability, inequality and alienation, as presented in Table 1. Herewith, economic issues have a special place in studies. The studies by Bauman (2000), Nemeth (2022), and Janoff-Bulman (2023) demonstrate the existential dimension of crime the best. The authors view crime as a way of searching for sense in life, alienation, and disappointment with society. The results of the semantic analysis and ranking of the detected factors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Thematic analysis of crime factors in the philosophical literature.

Factor	Thematic Relevance	Rank
Social inequality	Most frequently discussed as a root cause of crime, linked to existential despair.	1
Alienation	Highlighted as a key driver of criminal behavior due to disconnection from society.	2
Economic crisis	Often associated with existential uncertainty and survival-driven crime.	3
Culture of fear	Described as amplifying existential anxiety and justifying deviant behavior.	4
Legal system imperfections	Critiqued for fostering existential frustration and mistrust in justice.	5
Political instability	Linked to existential insecurity and erosion of moral frameworks.	6
Individualism	Explored as a factor leading to existential isolation and self-centered crime.	7
Search for life meaning	Identified as a motivator for crime when existential voids are unaddressed.	8
Mass media influence	Criticized for shaping existential perceptions of crime and morality.	9
Dysfunctional families	Discussed as a source of existential trauma and early criminal tendencies.	10

Source: Developed by the authors through thematic analysis of the philosophical literature cited in Table 1.

Table 2 presents social inequality as the leading factor in crime, closely linked to existential despair. Alienation emerges as a key driver, reflecting a loss of societal connection. Economic crises amplify uncertainty, often resulting in survival-driven offences. The culture of fear intensifies anxiety, legitimizing deviant behavior, whereas flaws in the legal system foster mistrust and frustration. Political instability undermines moral frameworks, contributing to existential insecurity. The next stage is a phenomenological analysis of nine European countries with different levels of economic and social well-being, as shown in Table 3.

The table demonstrates that countries with greater trust in the government and lower inequality, such as Sweden and Germany, experience reduced existential despair and, consequently, lower crime rates. In contrast, nations with significant inequality and low levels of trust, such as Hungary and Bulgaria, show persistent existential insecurity, driving higher crime rates. Ukraine’s sharp economic decline and political instability in 2022 reveal the compounding effects of existential crises in extreme conditions such as war.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the complex interplay between socioeconomic conditions and existential psychology in shaping criminal behavior. The results demonstrate that crime rates are not merely a function of economic indicators but are profoundly influenced by the existential climate in a society, characterized by levels of trust, alienation, and perceived justice. This aligns with the philosophical premise that crime can be an external manifestation of an internal crisis, a response to what Frankl (1985) might term an “existential vacuum.” Our data confirm that, showing that nations with higher economic development and strong social welfare institutions, such as Germany and Sweden, report lower crime rates. This phenomenon can be explained by what Jakovljević (2024) identifies as the stabilizing effect of economic security, which reduces survival-driven criminal impulses and fosters a collective sense of order and meaning.

In contrast, the persistently high crime rates in countries with significant inequality and low institutional trust, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Ukraine, underscore the criminogenic potential of existential despair. This finding is strongly supported by Brown (2024), who argues that systemic vulnerability and “feelings of despair and hopelessness” among populations who



see no prospects for improvement can catalyze criminal acts as a perceived means of problem solving. Furthermore, the case of Ukraine is an example of an extreme scenario where war and economic collapse have compounded existential insecurity, leading to survival-oriented crime. This observation has something in common with the concepts explored by Torres (2023), who analyzes how profound existential risk can destabilize societal norms and individual behavior, although his focus is on civilizational-level risk rather than national risk.

Table 3 Influence of social factors on crime rates (Eurostat Data, 2020-2022).

Country	Phenomenological Insights	Existential Dimensions of Crime	Interpretation of Trends
Germany	High trust in government correlates with lower criminality, reflecting a collective sense of stability and diminished existential despair.	Reduced alienation due to societal trust and economic recovery.	The decline in crime aligns with gradual GDP recovery and trust in government, highlighting the mitigating effect of existential security.
France	Decreasing trust in government and economic crises exacerbate perceptions of societal neglect and existential uncertainty.	Alienation and absurdity likely intensified by fluctuating economic stability.	Despite post-2020 GDP growth, declining trust in government maintains existential triggers for deviant behavior, slowing the reduction in crime rates.
Sweden	High social equality and government trust reduce existential anxiety, creating a stable environment less conducive to criminal behavior.	Strong community connections counteract existential isolation.	The slight rise in post-2020 crime rates may relate to increasing Gini coefficients, suggesting gradual socioeconomic disparities that affect existential stability.
Poland	Moderate trust levels and higher inequality contribute to existential frustration, driving higher crime rates compared to Western European countries.	Economic individualism fosters isolation and existential voids.	The gradual reduction in crime aligns with economic recovery but is hindered by persistently low governmental trust and growing inequality.
Czech Republic	Declining governmental trust and increasing inequality foster existential insecurity, reflected in steady but slow declines in crime rates.	Legal system imperfections and socioeconomic changes increase existential frustration.	Crime rates drop slowly despite economic recovery, indicating deeper existential challenges tied to governance and social structures.
Hungary	The lowest levels of trust in government amplify existential despair, with high inequality reinforcing isolation and existential frustration.	Widespread alienation and scepticism toward authority drive deviant behaviors.	Despite GDP growth, persistent inequality and low trust levels result in minimal reduction in crime rates, underscoring existential instability.
Bulgaria	Low development level, significant inequality, and distrust in government create an environment with existential despair and disillusionment.	Economic crises and familial instability compound existential voids, encouraging deviance.	Crime decreases slightly but remains high, reflecting systemic existential challenges exacerbated by structural inequalities and minimal societal trust.
Romania	Growing inequality and decreasing trust undermine existential security, although economic growth slightly alleviates despair.	Alienation persists due to socioeconomic disparities and weak institutional trust.	Crime rates decline slowly but remain high, as existential frustrations outpace the alleviating effects of modest economic recovery.
Ukraine	Severe economic downturns and extremely low trust in government exacerbate existential despair, especially in wartime.	Political instability and existential insecurity drive survival-oriented and deviant behaviors.	The sharp economic decline in 2022 correlates with a high crime rate, reflecting compounded existential crises driven by war, poverty, and disintegrating governance.

Source: Developed by the authors based on statistical data from Eurostat (2020–2022).

The role of trust in government and legal institutions emerges as a critical mitigating factor against existential frustration and subsequent crime. Our results indicate that higher levels of societal trust correlate with a gradual reduction in crime rates even in economies with moderate development. This finding is central to the argument made by Lynch et al. (2023) in their analysis of control theory, which empirically supports the notion that strong social ties and attachment are essential for preventing criminal acts. Their work provides an established sociological theory that explains the mechanism behind our phenomenological finding that high societal trust and low alienation are linked to lower crime rates. This perspective is further enriched by Vogt's (2023) philosophical concept of crime as a “denial of freedom” and punishment as its “affirmation.” From this viewpoint, low trust in government represents a denial of institutional freedom and fairness, which our study correlates with higher crime rates. Therefore, restoring trust and perceived justice becomes crucial, as it affirms freedom and aligns with our conclusions. When citizens perceive the legal system as imperfect or unjust, it fosters mistrust and alienation, effectively removing a key barrier to deviant behavior. This creates an environment where, as Heath-Kelly and Shanaah (2023) suggest, precrime interventions and rehabilitation efforts must address these deep-seated feelings of institutional alienation to be effective.



By synthesizing these perspectives, it becomes evident that a purely economic or punitive approach to crime prevention is insufficient. The theoretical significance of this study is its successful integration of philosophical existential concepts with empirical criminological data. This is indirectly confirmed by the work of Arandjelović (2023), who criticizes the current punitive justice system's failure to offer adequate meaning or rehabilitation. This finding supports our discussion that traditional punitive approaches are insufficient and that a system addressing deeper existential frustrations is needed for effective justice and a reduction in recidivism. While authors such as Imran et al. (2024) focus on applying existential crisis to environmental offenders, our research broadens this application to mainstream criminal behavior, suggesting that the search for meaning is a universal motivator. Therefore, practical crime prevention strategies must be multidisciplinary, aiming not only to improve economic conditions but also to strengthen social cohesion, build institutional trust, and address the profound existential voids that, as our study confirms, can lead individuals to criminal behavior. Further research should quantitatively measure these existential states through psychological surveys to further validate their impact alongside traditional socioeconomic metrics.

However, despite its heuristic value, existentialist analysis of crime has certain cultural limitations that must be taken into account. Existentialism as a philosophical tradition emerged in a specific Western European context and often emphasizes individual freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning in the face of absurdity—categories that may manifest differently in non-Western cultures. For example, in collectivist societies, where an individual's self-awareness is closely linked to group identity, the concept of "existential alienation" may have a different meaning or be less pronounced. In addition, cultural differences in the definition of freedom, responsibility, and morality can influence how internal crises translate into criminal behavior. Thus, universalizing existentialist categories without considering cultural context may oversimplify the interpretation of criminal motives. Future research should therefore prioritize cross-cultural comparative studies to determine whether concepts such as "alienation" or "despair" possess the same explanatory power for criminal behavior across diverse societal structures and whether they need to be adapted or supplemented by culturally specific analytical tools.

6. Conclusions

The relevance of the obtained results is stipulated by practical confirmation of theoretical studies on the existential level of the philosophy of crime. Many ideas of modern philosophical scientific thought have been confirmed with real statistics. The study revealed that the crime rate is closely related to social stability and security in society. According to the results, countries with high economic development and trust in government have lower crime rates. The research findings indicate that social inequality and injustice can increase criminal activity, especially among economically and socially vulnerable groups. This study will be useful for criminology students who are aware of the social and existential causes of crime. The results of this study will help researchers develop new approaches to the study of criminal behavior. It will also be useful for law enforcement officers to better understand criminals' motivations. Further studies can significantly expand the understanding of crime, focusing on interdisciplinary approaches. One promising direction is a more detailed study of the existential aspects of criminal behavior, particularly personal experiences, the search for a sense of life and alienation, which affect the decision regarding crime commitment.

7. Declarations

7.1. Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

7.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

7.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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