

victimless crimes

We think of crime as having an identifiable victim who suffers at the hands of another person. Some crimes, however, don't seem to have victims. These victimless crimes include prostitution, illegal sexual acts among consenting adults, illicit drug use, and gambling (see Table 7.3). In this type of crime, there is usually no complainant—no one who feels he or she has been harmed. These acts are designated as criminal because the community as a whole, or powerful groups within it, regard them as morally repugnant. Those who hold different views of morality think that at least some of these behaviors should not be considered criminal.

Still others argue that victimless crimes really do have victims. Compulsive gamblers rob their families of needed income; prostitutes spread AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; drug users may resort to other crimes to support their habit. According to this view, society should control these kinds of behaviors because they do have harmful effects.

Opponents answer that the government shouldn't try to legislate morality. Why should someone have the right to tell consenting adults what they can and can't do if they are not hurting or bothering anyone else? From a more pragmatic standpoint, what is gained by denying large segments of the population goods and services they want? Such laws are not only difficult to enforce; they also create black markets and opportunities for organized crime.

TABLE 7.3

Arrests for Crimes without Victims, 1991

Prostitution and commercialized vice	76,974
Drug abuse violations (all)	706,097
Illegal gambling	11,626
Drunkenness	582,036
Curfew, loitering (juvenile)	68,080
Runaways (juvenile)	125,495

Source: Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1991, p. 217, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C.

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Craig S. Johnson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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