



Dire Forecast:
The Impact of Climate Change on Crime

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Outline

- A. How I became interested in climate change and crime.
- B. A brief overview of climate change and its effects.
- C. Why I believe that climate change will become the major force driving crime this century – drawing on crime theories.

My Interest in Climate Change (CC)

- Closely followed news reports on climate change, predictions regarding the effects of CC increasingly more certain and severe
- Special obligation to act
 - Most serious problem to confront humanity
 - Been a major contributor to CC (average US resident contributes 16 tons CO₂ per year, versus 6 for UK; 2 for India, Peru; .5 for Ghana, Bangladesh)
 - Others will suffer the worst consequences of CC (future generations, the poor, those in developing countries)
- “How could I look my grandchildren in the eye and say that I knew about this but did nothing?” (David Attenborough) (note: can substitute “children” for “grandchildren”)

“The rich will find their world to be more expensive, inconvenient, uncomfortable, disrupted, and colourless: in general, more unpleasant and unpredictable, perhaps greatly so. The poor will die.” (Smith, cited in Ann Rev Public Health, 2008: 29:11-25).

But what to do?

- Little social science research on climate change when I wrote 2011 article, with certain exceptions (e.g., economic research on policies to reduce and adapt to CC)
- But climate change will have major social consequences
- Became convinced that climate change will become perhaps the major force driving crime, although its now largely neglected by criminologists
- Research on climate change and crime can help motivate efforts to mitigate and adapt to CC

The Sources of Climate Change

Climate change is driven by an increase in heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere, principally carbon dioxide (CO₂).

This increase is due largely to human activities, esp. the burning of fossil fuels and, to a lesser extent, deforestation & livestock farming...

CO₂ levels have increased from about 275 ppm during the pre-industrial period to about 415-420 ppm today.



Climate Change Involves

A rise in average temperature (on a trajectory for a 3 degree C rise by end of century)

Changing patterns of precipitation (more rain in some areas, less in others – esp. dry and semi-dry areas; more heavy downpours)

A rise in sea level (2-7 feet rise by the end of this century)

More extreme weather events (heat waves, droughts, forest fires, hurricanes, floods)



The Effects of Climate Change

Habitat change – grasslands turn to desert, forests to grassland, loss of coastal wetlands and mangrove forests, loss of coral reefs (major loss of plant and animal life)

Flooding of coastal areas, deltas, low-lying islands, and river basins

Negative health effects

Food and freshwater shortages



Effects continued

Loss of and threats to livelihood – esp. small farmers, herders, and fishers
(60% of workforce in developing nations)

Major economic and other demands as nations struggle to adapt to and
recover from the effects of climate change

Increased migration, often to
mega-cities in developing nations

Increased social conflict



We are NOW feeling the effects of Climate Change

We now live in a world of warmer, more violent weather. Stronger storms, longer droughts, heavier floods, larger fires. Lowlands are being lost to the oceans. Dry lands are being lost to the desert. Millions of people are moving because of a changed and changing climate.

New York Times, Dec. 31, 2021, "Scenes From A World on Fire."

Sample News Headlines from Past Year

- ***Climate Change an 'Emerging Threat' to U.S. Financial Stability, Regulators Say (Dec. 17)***
- ***Record Floods Stun Brazil's Northeast*** In northeast Brazil, local officials say they have never before seen flooding on this scale. Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes. Dec. 28
- ***Health Risks of Smoke and Ozone Rise in the West as Wildfires Worsen Jan. 5***
- ***Alaska Records a 67-Degree Day, a December Record Dec. 29***
- ***A Slow-Motion Climate Disaster: The Spread of Barren Land***
Brazil's Northeast ... is Now effectively turning into a desert
Dec. 3

The Impact of Climate Change on Crime

- Argue that climate change will increase crime for reasons identified by the major crime theories (strain, control, social learning, social support, trait, opportunity, and critical theories)
- Focus on strain theory.
 - Certain strains or stressors increase crime
 - These strains lead to negative emotions, prompting a desire for corrective action.
 - Crime a means to cope with strains (reduce or escape from strains, seek revenge, alleviate negative emotions)
 - Some more likely to engage in criminal coping than others (e.g., poor coping skills and resources, low social support, low social control, beliefs favorable to crime, traits favorable to crime)



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- Forced migration and associated strains
- Exposure to armed conflict
- Strains affecting higher classes, corporations, and developed nations

Strains are more likely to lead to crime when –

- they are high in magnitude
- they are seen as unjust
- they are associated with low control
- They are conducive to criminal coping

Strains are more likely to lead to crime among individuals and groups who –

- lack conventional coping skills and resources (e.g., money)
- are low in conventional social supports
- are low in social control
- are disposed to crime
- are in situations where the benefits of crime outweigh the costs

Climate change will also...

- Lower social control
- Foster beliefs and values favorable to crime
- Lead to individual traits conducive to crime
- Create opportunities for crime
- Increase social conflict

How can these ideas be tested?

- Criminologists need to expand their focus beyond individual traits and the social environment.
- Examine the effects of the natural environment on crime (e.g., temperature, land degradation, sudden- and slow-onset natural disasters, food and freshwater shortages)
- BUT “the future will not be the same as the past.” Effects of CC will become more severe; more often seen as unjust, our ability to adapt will decline....
- Must try to approximate these changes

But such research is important

- Climate change may not only have negative environmental, health, and economic effects ... but lead to a breakdown in social order as well
- Research can help motivate efforts to mitigate and adapt to CC
- Are many steps we can take .. Will create jobs, reduce dependence on foreign oil sources, promote a healthier lifestyle....