

# CHAPTER 1

## THE LINKS BETWEEN CRIME AND MORAL BREAKDOWN

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There appears to be some consensus that there **is** a moral crisis in South Africa. Politicians, religious leaders and social commentators have all spoken about the breakdown in morality. The most commonly cited evidence of the crisis is crime – specifically crimes involving violence or those which involve citizens avoiding their basic duties and obligations to the state or to each other. The moral regeneration initiative was one response to this crisis, emerging in parallel to countless initiatives aimed at reducing crime, some of which have themselves contained explicit appeals to morals, values or ethics. The moral regeneration effort has, though, remained separate from the various crime prevention policies and programmes.

The link between crime and moral breakdown is a very old one in social theory, pre-dating modern western sociology, but most famously espoused by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim at the turn of the 19th century, and then by 1930's American sociologist Merton, in their theories of *anomie* or 'normlessness'. Durkheim described social systems of moral regulation as being in a critical or chronic state, near collapse, with severe consequences for individuals:

People are not endowed at birth with fixed appetites and ambitions. On the contrary, their purposes and aspirations are shaped by the generalized opinions and reactions of others, by a collective conscience, that can appear through social ritual and routine to be externally derived, solid and objective. When society is disturbed by rapid change or major disorder, however, that semblance of solidity and objectivity can itself founder, and people may no longer find their ambitions subject to effective social discipline. It is hard to live outside the reassuring structures of social life, and the condition of anomie is experienced as a 'malady of infinite aspiration', accompanied by weariness, disillusionment, disturbance, agitation and discontent.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of *anomie* as a crisis resulting from social change, echoes with the explanations of crime put forward in South Africa's national crime prevention strategy (see chapter 2). However, sociologists are generally ill-

disposed to Durkheim's term *anomie*, arguing that even at their most devastated, for instance in conflict-torn and transitional societies like Sierra Leone, Bosnia or Rwanda, people are able to sustain a measure of social organisation,<sup>2</sup> and do not necessarily descend into a state of 'normlessness'.

More recent criminological theory suggests that the problems of moral breakdown are not specific to conflict-ridden or post-conflict societies, but instead are a key feature of late modernity:

The last third of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable transformation in the lives of citizens living in advanced industrialised societies. ... a world of structural unemployment, economic precariousness, a systematic cutting of welfare provisions, and the growing instability of family life and interpersonal relations. And where there once was a consensus of values, there was now burgeoning pluralism and individualism. "... Market forces generate a more unequal and less meritocratic society, market values encourage an ethos of 'every person for themselves'; together these create a combination which is severely criminogenic. Such a process is combined with a decline in the forces of informal social control, as communities are disintegrated by social mobility and left to decay as capital finds more profitable areas to invest and develop. At the same time, families are stressed and fragmented by the decline in communities' systems of support, the reduction of state support, and the more diverse pressures of work. These the pressures which lead to crime increase... Civil society becomes more segmented and differentiated: people become more wary and appraising of each other because of ontological insecurity (living in a plural world where individual biographies are less certain) and material security (a world of risk and uncertainty).<sup>3</sup>

Although Jock Young's description refers to life in advanced industrialised societies, much of it would be equally applicable to urban South African life. It sketches some of the structural context within which themes of morality and crime prevention have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa.

The role of moral degeneration as a risk factor for criminality has also been emphasised in the 'restorative justice' movement in recent years. Australian criminologist, John Braithwaite, one of the leaders in rethinking crime and punishment, touches on morality when he talks about situations "where conscience is not fully developed, approval of others is the primary motivator [for committing crime], not punishment or fear of punishment".<sup>4</sup>