Messner and Rosenfeld (1994; 2013) developed the Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) as an explanation for the high rates of serious crime in the United States. They theorize that high serious crime rates are the result of a culture that values material gain as the primary goal (i.e., the American Dream) with a weak social institutional structure. This study argues that IAT must be reconstructed because Messner and Rosenfeld: (1) discount religion as a social institution of importance, (2) exclude high inequality as a source of structural blockages, and (3) use the concept of the American Dream as a proxy for neoliberal capitalist ideology. As such, I argue that high serious crime rates are the result of the combination of economically-dominated non-economic social institutions—family, religion, education, and polity—coupled with high inequality, and a neoliberal social structure of accumulation. This dissertation uses qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to investigate the configurations of social institutions that lead to high serious crime and not high serious crime in the 50 U.S. states in 2007.

Multiple institutional pathways were found that lead to high serious crime and not high serious crime. The pathways for states located in the South show that the combination of not weak religion and high inequality with either weak education or weak polity lead to high serious crime. The pathways for states not located in the South show
more diversity with four pathways leading to high serious crime. Weak family, in combination with other institutions, leads to high serious crime. More generally, the findings demonstrate the importance of cultural issues beyond the American Dream. For example, states located in the South have distinctly different cultural issues with race playing a central role. In addition, this study determined the pathways that lead to not high serious crime. The majority of states not in the set of high serious crime are not located in the South. The four pathways to not high serious crime for states not located in the South had not high inequality in common. Further, these pathways suggest that the combination of not high inequality with not weak family and not weak religion or not weak family and not weak education leads to not high serious crime. These results point to a need for reducing inequality coupled with strengthening primary and secondary sites of socialization, important sources of informal social control, as a way to reduce high serious crime.

The limitations of this dissertation are the cross-sectional nature of the study and U.S. states as the unit of analysis. Future research should: (1) test the findings from this study with data from different points in time, particularly from similar social structures of accumulation; (2) use countries as the unit of analysis in order to assess if pathways to high serious crime differ among countries; and (3) let the pathways that lead to high serious crime indicate which interaction effects to include in quantitative RIAT research.