Question 1: What are some issues that need to be heeded when examining characteristics of juvenile offenders?

Answer 1: When examining the juvenile justice system, it is important to recognize some general commonalities about juvenile offenders. Before explaining some general characteristics of juvenile offenders, it must be pointed out that these characteristics are based on the information about juveniles who go through the system, which means that these general characteristics might be very different if every youth in America were processed the same. Some juveniles are let go by the police and no formal action is taken, nor is any statistical information recorded. Also, there are juveniles who are not caught for their offenses, which means that their demographic information is also not recorded. So, the existing information is on juvenile offenders who have been processed to some degree through the system, and the characteristics we discuss may not be real representations of all juvenile offenders. After examining some of the different aspects of juvenile offender characteristics and their explanations, along with some sociological theoretical explanations, it will become clearer why some juveniles are treated differently than others.

Question 2: What are gender and parental marital status patterns when it comes to juvenile offending?

Answer 2: The gender of juvenile offenders is one general characteristic that has long been established. Males are more likely to be in the juvenile justice system when compared to their female counterparts. Historically, males have always been more involved in delinquency. However, society has seen an increase in female participation in juvenile offending. Female juvenile offending is on the rise. Some argue that females commit as much crime as their male counterparts, but females are treated better and are often kept out of the formal juvenile justice process (e.g., the police are more likely to take females home rather than formally process them). The opposite is true for males. This is known in sociology as the chivalry hypothesis, which is the differential treatment of females by the criminal justice system because of their gender (Siegel, Welsh, and Senna, 2003).

Parental marital status is another characteristic that is often examined when looking at commonalities in juvenile offenders. Youth from single-parent families are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system when compared to youth from married two-parent families. This is another characteristic that should be examined closer than what is seen at face value.
Research on parental marital status shows that no parental structure is better than another. Producing healthy well-adjusted children is more about the emotional health of the family than about the family structure. This means that single-parent families can be just as good and healthy as married two-parent families. However, single-parent families do face a lot of barriers because of societal discrimination; they may lack resources, such as time and money. Most single-parent families rise to these challenges and overcome adversity quite well. Research has shown that the juvenile justice system is far more likely to be harsher on juvenile offenders from single-parent families because of archaic stereotypes. These stereotypes say the juvenile justice system needs to be more involved as the single parent is not able to handle the child adequately because of the parent's single-parent status. Offenders from married two-parent families are not treated as harshly when compared to youthful offenders from single-parent families because of related stereotypes. These stereotypes say that parents in a two-parent setting will handle their child better and will have more time and financial resources to do so.

**Question 3:** What are socioeconomic and racial patterns of juvenile crime?

**Answer 3:** The socioeconomic status or social class status of juvenile offenders is another well-established characteristic. Youth from poor and impoverished backgrounds are more likely to be involved in the juvenile system compared to youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds or higher social classes. Some feel that youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may commit just as much crime, but they are less likely to be processed into the juvenile justice system because their parents have more resources. For example, if a youth vandalizes a home and the parents offer to pay for the damages caused by the youth, reporting of the offense might be less likely to occur, which would keep this youth out of the juvenile justice system along with his/her demographic information. Youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to live in areas that are also poor. These are usually urban areas where high crime, high unemployment, and neighborhood dilapidation are evident. In poorer areas, police are also out looking for crime more than police in higher class areas. Policing in which officers are actively out searching for crime is known as proactive policing. In higher class areas, police are less responsive to happenings of crime, which means they are not actively out searching for it. So if an offender is involved in delinquent behavior, the likelihood of being caught by an officer as well as the potential involvement in the juvenile justice system would be greater if
the offense was committed in a poorer area.

The race of a juvenile offender is another general characteristic that has also been long established. Minority youth, including Hispanic and African-American youth, are far more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system as offenders when compared to Caucasian youth. Again, many feel that there is more to this issue than meets the eye. Such things as institutional discrimination in policing can be cited as one of the reasons for a disproportionate amount of minority youth involved in the juvenile justice system. This means minority youth may be sought out and treated harsher by police because of their race; and if all juvenile offenders were sought and treated equally, maybe there would not be such an overrepresentation of minority youth in the system. Another thing that must be pointed out is that many minorities live in poverty. With minority youth living in poorer areas where police are actively searching for crime, it makes minority youth more likely to be caught by police.

**Question 4:** What are sociological theories, and how do they explain juvenile crime and offenders?

**Answer 4:** Sociology is the study of human behavior and interactions. Crime is a type of human behavior, so juvenile offending falls under the realm of things studied by sociology. Sociology has theoretical perspectives to explain all different types of human behavior. Sociology has specific theoretical perspectives to explain criminal behavior, which would also include juvenile offending. Theory is a way to explain social phenomena or occurrences of certain behaviors based on some general assumptions and components. Sociology could in no way study every single juvenile offender—it would be impossible. However, sociology can study a lot of juvenile offenders and, from that population, make assumptions or draw theoretical conclusions about the whole. From these general assumptions and components, sociologists can take commonalities of the few and apply them to the whole. As juvenile offending is a type of behavior, people involved with it fall into the realm of being studied by sociology. Theoretical perspectives in sociology are concerned with understanding why juvenile crime occurs. The theoretical perspectives look at commonalities, such as physical and social characteristics that juvenile offenders may share, to help explain why the juveniles are involved in committing offenses.

Sociological theories that attempt to explain the happenings of juvenile delinquency examine many factors. Characteristics and social factors that
Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders

sociology examines to understand juvenile crime can include race, socioeconomic class, school experiences, peer experiences, family experiences, and gender. Sociology is interested in examining what the aforementioned issues have in common and how the different components might be a cause or a related factor in why juveniles might commit crime. By studying such things, sociologists can get a bigger picture of why juvenile offending occurs and who is involved in juvenile offending. They can also draw opinions and generalize about juvenile crime and offending and apply them to the rest of the population.

**Question 5:** Is sociology the only discipline that attempts to explain juvenile crime and offenders from a theoretical perspective?

**Answer 5:** Sociological is not the only perspective that explains crime and juvenile offending based on theoretical perspectives. Psychology and criminology also have theoretical explanations on why juvenile offending occurs. You will find that sociology and criminology are very interrelated in their explanations of juvenile offenders and juvenile crime. The reason sociology and criminology have similar theoretical perspectives is because criminology was born out of sociology. As explained earlier, sociology is the study of human interactions and behaviors. Sociology is interested in all human interactions and behaviors. Human interactions and behaviors include marriage, the family experience, the school experience, the elderly, the poor, alternative lifestyles, and much, much more. Crime has been around probably as long as people have been and has raised great interest. Society and sociology have recognized the importance of understanding crime and criminal behavior. As crime has been around so long and its components have had so many effects on society, its importance became worthy of its own discipline within sociology, which is known now as criminology.

Criminology is also concerned with the study of human behavior and human interaction—but only as it relates to crime. Many aspects are included in criminology. Some of these aspects consist of prison studies, law enforcement, the legal system, offenders, types of offenders (including juvenile offenders), types of crime, and victim typologies. Criminology takes much influence from sociology when it comes to explaining why crime and juvenile offenses occur, but it also recognizes other disciplines' impact on the explanation of crime and juvenile offending.

Psychology, unlike sociology and criminology, explains and examines criminal behavior more on an individual level. Psychological explanations for crime and
juvenile offending are focused on things such as cognitive interpretations and emotions that may make one more likely to offend.

The biological perspective is a discipline that examines crime and juvenile offending from the nature perspective rather than from a nurture perspective. Biological explanations of crime and juvenile offending have been based on such things as chemical imbalances within the offenders and prevalence of certain genes that may make one more prone to violence and criminal behavior.

Different perspectives that examine crime and juvenile offending have different opinions and rationales of why it occurs. However, it must be noted that when it comes to issues regarding crime and juvenile offending, there are many similarities. The collection of these disciplines can give scholars a better idea of why crime and juvenile offending occur.

**Question 6:** What is social control, and what are the agencies and agents of social control?

**Answer 6:** Social control is a way for society to maintain social order. Without social order in society, there would be chaos, nothing would run properly, and no one would know what they do or what is expected of him/her as a member of society. How do people know how to act? Many would say they learned it at home, but there is more to it than just that. How do people know how to act in our society? People know how to act because society sets norms. Norms are transmitted by our families, tradition, the media, and almost every component of society. It is common knowledge that crime is something in which people should not involve themselves—this is a norm that has been learned from members of society.

How does society reinforce this norm of not becoming involved in crime? Society enforces this norm via the process of social control. There are two types of social control: formal and informal. Both are very powerful. Usually, if one is working, the other is not as necessary. Informal social controls are informal ways in which society can keep its members in control and have them refrain from violating its standards. Many people do not commit crime because they are afraid of what others will say and that people will ostracize them because of their involvement in criminal behavior. Such things as gossip and ostracism are ways in which people can maintain social order—most people will not do things out of the norm because they fear types of informal social controls. Informal social control works very well in society, but there
are members in society that these informal controls do not seem to affect.

Then there is the formal social control. These controls can consist of such things as fines and imprisonment for violating the norms by being involved in criminal activity. Formal social controls are set up in society to sanction members who violate the norms and who cannot be controlled by informal means (e.g., criminal and juvenile offenders). Agencies of social control are very important when it comes to maintaining social order. They are institutions that reinforce the norms. Such agencies of social control include churches, governments, schools, and the criminal justice system. All of these agencies can give you some type of sanctions. For example, if you cheat on an exam, you will probably be expelled (which is a formal action/sanction); if you violate a code, some churches might excommunicate you (which is a formal action/sanction.)

Agents of social control fall into two categories: agents of informal social control and agents of formal social control. Agents of informal social control can be your family, peers, neighborhoods, and anyone else in society. Any of these people can informally sanction you if you step out of the norms on which that society has agreed. Agents of formal social control are people who are involved in handing out the formal social control sanctions. Agents of social control can be the police, judges, priests, principals, congress, and the president. Social control is the reason most people, including juveniles, do not go against the norm and commit crime; however, when crime does occur, society has informal and formal social controls to deal with offenders.

Question 7: What is labeling theory?

Answer 7: Response: Labeling theory is a sociological theory that is concerned with the concept of how society may negatively label a juvenile offender. The process a juvenile offender goes through via the juvenile justice system and society’s social controls is responsible for this labeling process, according to labeling theory. Labeling theory can best be laid out by first explaining an act of primary deviance, which is the initial criminal act by a juvenile (e.g., stealing a car). Let’s say a juvenile is picked up and taken into custody for this crime in front of his home (Siegel, Welsh, and Senna, 2003). The juvenile’s neighbors, friends, and parents see the police arrest and handcuff him. The juvenile is taken to the police station, then a detention center, and then goes in front of a judge. Let’s say the judge releases the juvenile into his parents custody but puts the juvenile on house arrest until a future court date, which will be set up to determine what the outcome should
The juvenile goes home after being formally sanctioned by the juvenile justice system. When the juvenile returns home, everyone in the neighborhood now looks at the juvenile differently. The family has a way of punishing the juvenile, and the neighbors and the juvenile's friends are ignoring him or have been forbidden to socialize with him because of what the juvenile has done. The juvenile begins to start feeling isolated and starts buying into the idea that he is indeed a deviant or a criminal. Maybe the juvenile starts seeking out other juveniles who are also undergoing the same formal and informal sanctions (Siegel, Welsh, and Senna, 2003). The juvenile starts adopting a different attitude and perception and begins falling deeper away from societal norms because he feels that he is now different. This will lead to secondary deviance—a second criminal act brought upon by the juvenile believing in and accepting his delinquent label given to him by the juvenile justice process and informal and formal sanctions. The juvenile may go out and steal a second car and become what is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which means that the juvenile fulfills a destiny the juvenile justice system process and society’s social controls unintentionally imposed on him.

A good example of a measure that the juvenile justice system takes to prevent labeling is changing around the terminology it uses for a juvenile offender during the court process. The terminology used by the juvenile justice system is a lot less wretched than the terms used by the adult criminal justice system.

Question 8: What is conflict theory?

Answer 8: Conflict theory was born out of Marxism. Karl Marx was a German philosopher known as the "father of communism." Marx wrote on the ideas of communism, which basically laid out that everyone in a society should be treated the same, have the same amount of money and goods as everyone else, and that no one should have power over another. Marx was concerned with the exploitive nature of capitalism. He felt in a capitalistic society, there would be a few people (the "bourgeoisie" as he called them, or the "have," which most others call them) who had all the money and the power and that they would control and exploit the masses (the "proletariats" as he called them, or the "have nots," which most others call them) who had no money and no power (Siegel, Welsh, and Senna, 2003). Conflict theory developed out of the Marxism and began looking at such things as crime, race, gender, and many more things based on the nature of exploitation, power, and money. According to conflict theorists, there is a disproportionate amount of minority juvenile offenders in the system or confined in institutions (also known as disproportionate minority confinement D.M.C.) because they are the "have nots." These juveniles have no money, no power, and no social
influence, and the laws by which they are punished are created by the few people who have no commonalities with them. These "have nots" (juvenile minority offenders), according to conflict theorists, suffer because their racial heritage puts them in a category where they can be discriminated against and controlled by the ruling class, or the "haves." People who are in poverty also have no money or social influence; and according to conflict theorists, they would also be subjected to unfair treatment by the rich, or the "haves." People in poverty are not given legitimate opportunities for success (e.g., employment opportunities); therefore, they might create illegitimate opportunities for themselves to survive. Some of these illegitimate opportunities could be criminal acts. Great amounts of minority youth are also in poverty, which makes them double-fold victims of the "haves," according to conflict theorists.

Gender is also examined by conflict theorists. American society has always been of a patriarchal nature, which means men usually have the power, money, and social influence. Women have historically been under the rule of men—they have made less money and have not had the ability to vote or own property in this country for many years. Women, as well as minorities, have enjoyed significant advances in this country, but some feel we are still far from having balance. Conflict theorists would point to women as being the "have nots" because they do not have as much money, power, or social influence as males and, therefore, can be controlled by them. The "haves" write our laws and polices, run the government, decide where and to which programs the money goes, and are mostly concerned with maintaining their well-being while the masses or the "have nots" suffer. According to Marx, if the "have nots" became aware of their depraved situation (known as class consciousness) and banned together, they would rise up against the "haves" and fight them. He envisioned a bloody class war, which would end with the victory of the "have nots"; and all power and economics would be divided equally, which would be an end to social injustices.

Question 9: What is learning theory?

Answer 9: Learning theory is a sociological theory that holds that criminal behavior is learned. Learning theory is a very easy concept to grasp. The whole idea here is "monkey see, monkey do." We learned how to speak, walk, and interact by observing those around us. The people who raise us, our families, are the most important components of socialization. We learn from observing the people around us. We can also learn about society from, for example, the media. We learn values, norms, and most everything from
Many people are interested in why crime occurs. Learning theory would suggest that crime and juvenile offending derives from a process of learning these behaviors by observation. Just as we learn in school how to write papers, someone will learn how to steal a car radio, for example. They will learn to commit crime, according to learning theory, the same way we learned how to write papers—through the process of observation and application. The people who raise us have a huge impact on us according to learning theory. If those who raise us have a deviant value system and are involved in criminal behavior, it is likely that we will also grow up to have a deviant value system and may even be involved in criminal behavior. There is a lot of research that supports the idea that juveniles who have parents involved in criminal activity have a significantly higher chance of also becoming involved in criminal activity. If someone was taught that criminal behavior is normal, even though greater society disagrees, that person would have a very good chance of adopting those behaviors rather than society’s norm. There are a few theories in sociology that fall under learning theory, which include differential association theory, neutralization theory, and differential reinforcement theory.

**Question 10:** What is rational choice theory?

**Answer 10:** Many people feel that juvenile offenders do not commit crimes based on their uncontrolled circumstances, such as poverty or race. Most feel that juvenile offenders have culpability for their criminal acts and, therefore, should pay for them. This may be a reflection on why we have gotten tougher on juvenile crime—we find juveniles to be responsible for their actions regardless of their circumstances. Rational choice theory would be for those who come from the perspective that the choice of being involved in crime is up to the juvenile offender. Rational choice theory holds that juveniles commit crimes because they make a rational choice to do so. Juveniles will, according to this theory, commit a crime because they are motivated to do so, and they have made that decision based on weighing the pros (the possible benefits) and the cons (the possible drawbacks) of what committing the criminal act will do. They then make a decision whether or not to commit the criminal act (Siegel, Welsh, and Senna, 2003). The possible benefits of committing a crime could include monetary gain, peer respect, and even just the mere thrill of committing the criminal act. The possible cons of committing a crime for juvenile offenders would be getting caught; being sanctioned formally by the juvenile justice system; and being sanctioned
informally by their parents, friends, and neighborhoods. According to this theory, if the possible benefits of committing the crime outweigh the possible cons, the juvenile would probably commit the crime. According to this perspective, crime is committed by juveniles after they weigh the positives and the negatives; and if there are more positives, the crime is likely to occur. This line of logic may also reinforce why the juvenile justice system is now being harsher on juvenile offenders. If the reason for juvenile crime is merely a choice and it has to do with weighing the pros and cons, the juvenile justice system would be right to impose harsher punishments to change the choices of potential juvenile offenders.

Reference