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## DIRECT SUPERVISION AND DELINQUENCY: ASSESSING THE ADEQUACY OF STRUCTURAL PROXIES

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### ABSTRACT

*This research tests the hypothesis that children who grow up in families that carefully and consistently monitor children's behavior will be less delinquent than children in families where supervision is lax and/or haphazard. Although research operationalizing direct supervision in family interactional terms has supported this hypothesis, research using structural proxies for direct supervision (i.e., family size, broken home, and employed mother) has tended to show negligible effects. This research tests the direct supervision hypothesis using a more parsimonious structural proxy—the ratio of adults to children in a household. It is hypothesized that this ratio will be negatively related to delinquency, and that it will be a stronger predictor of delinquency than more common structural measures. Using data from the 1986 wave of the Monitoring the Future survey (Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley, 1986), bivariate and multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models reveal that none of the structural variables, including the ratio of adults to children, are good predictors of delinquency. These results support Wells and Rankin's (1958) contention that family structural proxies are inadequate for testing the specific family functional processes on which direct supervision hinges.*

### INTRODUCTION

Much evidence suggests a strong relationship between various aspects of the family and delinquency (Canter, 1982; Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987; Hirschi, 1969; Larzelere and Patterson, 1990; Nye, 1958; Rankin and Wells, 1990; Rosen, 1985; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Van Voorhis et al., 1988; Wells and Rankin, 1988; Wilson, 1987). As Wells and Rankin (1988) note, however, there is disagree-

ment about the causal links that account for these relationships. One reason associations between family variables and delinquency have not been explained adequately is the narrow theoretical focus that has evolved. Though causal accounts rooted in theories of differential association (Matsueda and Heimer, 1987), strain (Rosen, 1985), and social control (Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1958) have been employed and tested, control theories have dominated. Among the control theories, Hirschi's (1969),

which highlights the import of social bonds, has been most prevalent. As a result, scholarly work has underemphasized a potentially important dimension of familial function—direct supervision, or control, of youths by parents and other adults (Wells and Rankin, 1988).

Control theories tend to focus on either indirect control, control that results when an individual has internalized the social norms and values that govern interaction, or direct control, control that is exerted through the monitoring of an individual's behavior by significant others. The version of control theory usually employed to explain family/delinquency relationships focuses on indirect control and posits that conformity results mainly when youths develop strong affective and cognitive ties to conventional institutions (Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1958). Since the family is the most significant conventional institution in the lives of most children, social bonds to it are especially important. Hirschi's (1969) argument portrays family influence on delinquency as realized almost exclusively through the indirect controls that result from a strong attachment of the child to the family. In his later work, focusing less on social control and more on self-control, Hirschi (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) does point out the importance of parental monitoring (direct control). He continues to downplay the import of direct control relative to other central variables, however. Nye's (1958) approach also gives primacy to indirect controls, though he recognized, but gave less weight to, the family's ability to influence children's delinquent propensities through the use of direct, supervisory controls. Both Nye (1958) and Hirschi (1969) discount the relative importance of direct control on the grounds that, unlike indirect control, it requires that a parent be present when children face delinquent temptations. Larzelere and Patterson (1990:305) argue that this logic "assumes that direct parental controls will be unrelated or negatively related to internalized and indirect controls." Their proposed "coercion theory" is more inclusive since it recognizes the importance of direct *and* indirect controls, as well as their possible interactions (Larzelere and Patterson, 1990; Rankin and Wells, 1990).

Wells and Rankin (1988), however, contend that direct controls per se are more important than theorists have acknowledged. According to them, empirical tests of direct control have produced only weak and statistically insignificant outcomes because researchers typically have relied on crude indicators such as family size, broken home, or maternal employment. They maintain that such indicators reflect structural conditions that are only "inferentially and indeterminately tied to direct control" (Wells and Rankin, 1988:268). Since recent studies indicate that measures of direct parental supervision are significantly related to delinquency (Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987; Hagan, 1989; Hagan, Gillis, and Sampson, 1985, 1987; Sampson and Laub, 1993), Wells and Rankin (1988) were inspired to investigate the issue using more appropriate measures of direct control.

Wells and Rankin (1988) contend that direct parental control has three components: (a) normative regulation, which refers to parents' specification of rules and expectations; (b) monitoring, which involves supervision to ensure rule compliance; and (c) punishment, or the use of sanctions in response to misbehavior. Using indexes of direct control that reflect these three components, they found a modest, statistically significant relation between direct control and delinquency that is independent of indirect control. Their conclusion that direct and indirect controls are important and may work independently also is supported by later research (Rankin and Wells, 1990), which found almost no significant interaction between parental attachment (indirect control) variables and the various components of direct control (one exception was the interaction term for punishment contingency and attachment).

Wells and Rankin's (1988) work has stimulated renewed interest in the relationship between direct control and delinquency. Recently, scholars have examined interactions among the various components of direct control (Seydlitz, 1991, 1993; Rankin and Wells, 1990), interactions between direct control and indirect control (Seydlitz, 1993; Rankin and Wells, 1990), and age and gender variations in direct and indirect controls (Hagan, Gillis, and Simp-

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