



## THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL CONTROLS ON DELINQUENCY

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### ABSTRACT

*Previous studies have argued that not only indirect controls but also direct controls lessen delinquency. Through a self-report survey of high school youths, the current study attempts to assess this thesis. Supportive of previous studies, the data revealed that even with a range of theoretically salient variables controlled, direct control was inversely related to delinquent involvement. This relationship, however, was stronger and more consistent for males than females.*

In *Causes of Delinquency*, Hirschi (1969) set forth his version of social control theory, arguing that participation in delinquency is explained by the lack of "bonding to conven-

tional society." He contended that there were four elements of the social bond: (1) attachment, such as to family, friends, teachers; (2) commitment to attain conventional goals;

(3) involvement, such as in school, church, or family activities; and (4) belief or respect for police and laws. Within social control theory, attachment to parents was viewed as most crucial to understanding misconduct. According to Hirschi (1969:88), "If the bond to the parent is weakened, the probability of delinquent behavior increases, if this bond is strengthened, the probability of delinquent behavior decreases."

Since Hirschi's original theoretical formulation, a plethora of empirical tests have assessed the explanatory power of social control theory. For example, social control variables have successfully explained illegal drug use (Ginsberg and Greenley, 1978; Griffin and Griffin, 1978; Johnson, 1979; Rosenbaum, 1987), serious delinquency (Canter, 1982; Jang, 1989; Mak, 1990; Reinarnman and Fagan, 1988), minor delinquency (Friday and Hage, 1976; Hindelang, 1973; Norland et al., 1979; Poole and Regoli, 1979; Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts, 1981), school failure and delinquency (Eve, 1978; Kelly and Pink, 1973; Rankin, 1980; Shover et al., 1979), domestic abuse (Williams and Hawkins, 1989), and white-collar criminality (Lasley, 1988).

Despite the considerable empirical support for the theory, it has been suggested that social control theory has suffered from a lack of creative theoretical reconceptualization. The majority of empirical tests of the theory continue either to replicate or to use close approximations of Hirschi's (1969) original measures. In response to these circumstances, Wells and Rankin (1988) and Rankin and Wells (1990) propose that in attempting to account for juvenile misconduct, researchers should examine more closely the theoretical concepts within social control theory—most notably, different types of parental controls. Prompted by this insight, the current study attempts to use and extend Wells and Rankin's delinquency research on direct and indirect controls.

#### RECONCEPTUALIZING PARENTAL CONTROL

In his social bond theory, Hirschi (1969) argues that attachments to others—especially to

parents—reduce delinquent involvement. For Hirschi, parental attachments involve the affective ties between youths and their parents. When juveniles are emotionally close to their parents, they are more likely to care about their normative expectations and to resist delinquent impulses; if such emotional bonds are weak, however, parental expectations exert little restraining influence, and the youths are free to break the law (see also Akers, 1994:116; Wells and Rankin, 1988:265).

In this case, youths' conformity is achieved as a by-product of their attachments to parents and not as the result of specific attempts to discipline them. As a result, the quality of attachment functions as an indirect parental control (Wells and Rankin, 1988; see also Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987; Rankin and Wells, 1990; Rosen, 1985). Wells and Rankin (1988) note, however, that attachment is not the only type of parental control. They argue that criminologists also should examine the "relation between delinquency and a somewhat forgotten concept in control—what Nye (1958) calls 'direct controls'" (1988:264). These direct parental controls involve the "immediate application (or threat) of punishments and rewards to gain compliance with conventional norms" (Rankin and Wells, 1990:142). Thus, while indirect controls are the constraints on youths that flow from the quality of their affective attachment to parents, direct controls are the actions that parents consciously take to limit misconduct.<sup>1</sup>

Using 1966 Youth in Transition Survey data, Wells and Rankin (1988) and Rankin and Wells (1990) found support for their reconceptualized direct control measures. In fact, they found that direct controls are at least as effective as indirect controls in explaining the delinquent involvement of male youths. Additionally, Rankin and Wells (1990:163) determined that generally when "punishment . . . is too strict, frequent, or severe [it] can lead to a greater probability of delinquency *regardless* of parental attachments" (emphasis added).

The efforts made by Wells and Rankin are salient contributions to the study of family interaction patterns and delinquency. They have revived interest in studying direct controls, a

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