



# Social bonds and male juvenile delinquency while on probation: An exploratory test in Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

The Hong Kong probation system is considered as the least researched component within the criminal justice system. Therefore, limited information is known about the Hong Kong probation system and offenders who are serving their probation order, especially in the juvenile population. This study is among the first to examine the differential effects of social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), measured during their probation period, on theft and violent delinquency in a saturated sample of 94 juvenile male probationers (aged 14 to 20 years) in Hong Kong. As expected, findings indicate that poor parental bonding and negative belief in the legal system are likely to increase the propensity to commit theft and violent delinquency, respectively, including the probation period. However, though not uncommon, the increase level of involvement in organizational activities is likely to result in the increase of propensity to commit violent crime, even during the probation period. This study further offers the implications for social services that target the juvenile offenders in terms of fostering a healthy parent–child bonding and a clear understanding of the criminal justice system via the enhancement of the police–youth relationship. Limitations and future research directions are also outlined.

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## 1. Introduction

The Hong Kong probation system received the least public attention compare to other primary components within the criminal justice system, such as the police, corrections, and the law. Therefore, it is not surprising that research on probation-related topics in Hong Kong has been scarce and most of the studies published are out of date (Chui, 2000). In addition, a large majority of these published studies were conducted with adult samples (e.g., Chui, 2004, 2006). Empirical studies conducted with juveniles in a probation setting were limited.

Hence, the current study was among the first to sample Hong Kong juvenile male probationers in the analysis of the relationship between social bonds and delinquency. Implications for social services, especially in the realm of social work discipline are discussed.

## 2. Literature review

Prior to this study findings are presented, an overview of the Hong Kong probation system for readers who are not familiar with this system will be provided, along with relevant theoretical concepts of the social control theory.

### 2.1. An overview of the Hong Kong probation system

Similar to many other countries, the probation service in Hong Kong has been a widely used noncustodial sentencing option for juvenile offenders who are adjudicated for less serious delinquency (Chui, 2008; see Hamai, Ville, Harris, Hough, & Zvekic, 1995). With its historical root traced back to the English and Welsh systems in the 1960s and 1970s; the Hong Kong probation system, under the Social Welfare Department, is “basically an import from overseas [during British] colonial times” (Chan, 1996, p. 101) with key objective to reduce the offenders’ reoffending risk and to ease their community reintegration process upon release. Nonetheless, the probation system in Hong Kong, to some extent, remains distinct in terms of its operational functions (Chui, 2006).

The legislative origins of the probation service in Hong Kong can be found within the *Juvenile Offenders Ordinance of 1933*, which was later superseded by the *Probation of Offenders Ordinance of 1956* with the inclusion of adult offenders (Chan, 1996). In accordance with the existing legislation of the *Probation of Offenders Ordinance (Chapter 298)*, less serious and nonviolent adjudicated juvenile offenders aged 10 and above are typically placed under the statutory supervision of a probation officer in a community setting for a period between one to 3 years depending on the severity of their index offense. Notably, violation of probation order conditions (e.g., work and residence, submission of a urine sample for drug tests) is a criminal offense that can result in further closed-setting detention.

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Rehabilitation, rather than punitive function, has been the stated fundamental aim of the Hong Kong probation service. Adopting the probation practice paradigm of “advise, assist, and befriend” under the *Rules of Offenders Ordinance* (Hong Kong Government, 1985), probation officers in Hong Kong are expected to have professional social work qualification (Chui, 2002). Skilled intervention of social approaches such as the use of individual casework and counseling, family-oriented casework intervention, and other psychological service are emphasized (Chui, 2006), with a primary goal to enable offenders to reform (Chui, 2004) rather than controlling, punishing, or monitoring by the probation officers (Lo et al., 1997). Positive outcomes of rehabilitative-modeled probation service have been found in studies conducted with Hong Kong population (e.g., Chui, 2000).

## 2.2. Social control theory

The social control theory, as proffered by Hirschi (1969), theorized that delinquency occurs due to weak social bonds. Simply put, the stronger one's social bonds to the conventional society, the less likely he or she will involve in activities that are against societal norms. According to Hirschi (1969), there are four primary types of social bonds: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Attachment simply refers to the affective ties toward parents, peers, and school. Parental attachment, as one of the widely researched attachment elements, include the amount of parental supervision on children, the quality of parent–child communication and time spent together, and parents' knowledge of their children's friends (Booth, Farrell, & Varano, 2008; Hirschi, 1969). Parental transmission of prosocial values and investment of quality time in their children are found to be negatively related with the propensity to commit delinquency (Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001).

Aside from the parental attachment, peer attachment is another important social bond element in Hirschi's theoretical model. According to Jang (2002), the decrease of parent–child attachment during adolescence, especially in mid-adolescence, is likely to increase peer association. Hirschi (1969) further posited a spurious “peer effect” on individual delinquency as a result of weak parent–child social bond. The delinquent “peer effect” becomes strongest when the adolescents have strong attachment to and frequent contact with their delinquent peers, and when their peers display delinquent behavior in their presence (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000). However, Pabon, Rodriguez, and Gurin (1992) claimed that delinquent peer associations are mainly characterized by loneliness and estrangement as a result of unwillingness to listen to others' problem, which support Hirschi's assertion that there is a lack of attachment among delinquent.

According to Booth et al. (2008), prosocial commitment and involvement are both resulted from proper attachment and the internalization of prosocial norms. Put it differently, commitment refers to the adolescents' aspirations for and behavior consistent with later attending college and acquiring an esteemed occupation. Among other types of researched commitments, school commitment is the widely operationalized social bond in most studies testing the social control theory on juvenile delinquency (e.g., Booth et al., 2008; Özbay & Özcan, 2008).

Involvement, in contrast, is basically the active participation in social activities. Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, and Johnston (1996) stated that involvement in conventional activities (e.g., athletics, religion, and community services) is able to bond individuals to institutions, and is expected to reinforce prosocial norms and create avenues for attachments with other prosocial individuals. Thus, participation in delinquent acts can be minimized or completely deterred. Hirschi (1969), however, asserted that mere involvement in conventional activities alone is insufficient to deter delinquent behavior as delinquency can take just minutes to commit. Interestingly, Begg, Langley, Moffitt, and Marshall (1996) found that involvement in activities such as organized sports may

in fact inflate risks for delinquency, especially among male adolescents (see also Garbarino, 2006).

As the fourth social bond element, belief refers to the respect for moral validity of societal norms and rules. Beliefs are theoretically associated with other social bonds through value legitimization (Hirschi, 1969) and acceptance of rules as fair and consistently enforced (Jenkins, 1997). To illustrate, individuals who hold strong belief and accept conventional norms as valid are likely to display low delinquent behavior. In addition, prosocial attachment and commitment are expected to increase morality belief and thus reduce the propensity to commit delinquent acts (Laundra, Kiger, & Bahr, 2002).

## 3. Present study

As one of a very few studies examining juvenile probationers in Hong Kong, this study aims to examine the effect of different social bonds, measured while they are on probation, in predicting juvenile male probationers' propensity in committing theft and violent delinquency, even during their probation period. From a social work perspective, this study also aspires to offer practical implications for social services that targeting juvenile offenders.

## 4. Data and methods

Hong Kong is a special administrative region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China with an estimate 95% of the people is of Chinese descent. Often described as a region where “East meets West” with its history can be traced back to the British colony time, contemporary Hong Kong is undoubtedly a melting pot with substantial Western influences. People in Hong Kong by and large balance their Western modernized way of life with traditional Chinese cultural customs.

### 4.1. Population and sampling

Aside from another juvenile residential home in Hong Kong that caters for those aged 14 and below, the targeted residential home of this study is the only transitional housing for juveniles who are above 14 years. The daily population capacity of this residential home is 40 juveniles at a time whose probation order ranges from 3 to 6 months, with less than 20 new intakes per month. Upon approval from the university's institutional review board (IRB) and the personnel in-charge of the residential home, 94 juvenile male probationers aged 14 to 20 years who have recently started serving their probation order in this residential home were recruited out of a saturation sample over a period of five months of data collection started in the second quarter of 2010. The participation response rate was 90%. After consultation with their social workers, these juveniles' informed consent was obtained. Questionnaire was administered face-to-face by 3 trained research assistants with the juveniles on the one-on-one basis without any third party interference. All interviews were completed in about 3 months.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of juvenile probationers on age, highest education level, religious belief, self-reported onset age of criminal behavior, and age of first adjudication/conviction. Overall, juvenile probationers aged between 14 and 20 years ( $M = 16.96$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). With the exception of two juvenile probationers, all other juveniles were at least educated at junior secondary level (Forms 1–3; equivalent to 7th–9th Grades in the US) with 33% of their highest education level was at senior secondary level (Forms 4–5; equivalent to 10th–12th in the US). This information has to be interpreted cautiously as there are at least nine juveniles were yet to reach the required age for senior secondary education in Hong Kong. A large majority of these juvenile probationers started to behave delinquently between the age of 13 and 18 years (75%), with close to 20% of them acknowledged their first delinquent behavior at age 12 and below. Accordingly, approximately 84% of these juveniles

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