

social control theory

social control theory is a fundamental concept in criminology and sociology that explains why individuals conform to societal norms and laws. This theory posits that people's bonds to society and the institutions within it prevent them from engaging in deviant or criminal behavior. Unlike other theories that focus on why people commit crimes, social control theory emphasizes the mechanisms that encourage conformity. This article explores the origins, key components, and applications of social control theory, as well as its criticisms and relevance in contemporary research. By understanding this theory, one gains insight into the social constructs that maintain order and discourage deviance. The following sections will provide an in-depth examination of social control theory's framework and impact.

- Origins and Development of Social Control Theory
- Key Components of Social Control Theory
- Applications of Social Control Theory
- Criticisms and Limitations
- Contemporary Relevance and Research

Origins and Development of Social Control Theory

Social control theory emerged in the early 20th century as a response to prevailing explanations of criminal behavior that focused primarily on individual pathology or social disorganization. The theory was initially articulated by sociologist Walter Reckless and later expanded by Travis Hirschi, who is often credited with formalizing the modern version of social control theory in his 1969 work, "Causes of

Delinquency." Hirschi's approach shifted the focus from why individuals commit deviant acts to why they choose not to commit such acts. This shift introduced the concept that strong social bonds to family, school, and other institutions act as controls against delinquency and crime.

Key Components of Social Control Theory

At the core of social control theory are the social bonds that connect individuals to society. These bonds create a sense of obligation and restraint, discouraging deviant behavior. Hirschi identified four primary elements of these social bonds:

Attachment

Attachment refers to the emotional and social ties individuals have with others, particularly family, peers, and community members. Strong attachments foster concern for others' opinions and reduce the likelihood of deviance.

Commitment

Commitment involves the investment one has in conventional activities such as education, career, and social roles. The greater the commitment, the more a person has to lose by engaging in deviance.

Involvement

Involvement is the extent to which an individual participates in conventional activities. High levels of involvement leave less time and opportunity for deviant acts.

Belief

Belief encompasses the acceptance of social norms and laws as legitimate and binding. Strong belief in societal rules decreases the likelihood of violating them.

- Attachment to others
- Commitment to conventional goals
- Involvement in lawful activities
- Belief in societal norms and rules

Applications of Social Control Theory

Social control theory has been widely applied in criminology, sociology, and psychology to explain patterns of conformity and deviance across different populations. It has been used to analyze juvenile delinquency, adult criminal behavior, and even non-criminal forms of deviance. This theory informs a variety of social policies and intervention programs aimed at strengthening social bonds to prevent crime and promote social order.

Juvenile Delinquency Prevention

Many juvenile justice programs incorporate principles from social control theory by focusing on enhancing family relationships, increasing school engagement, and promoting positive peer associations. These programs aim to build stronger social bonds that deter youth from engaging in delinquent behavior.

Community and Social Policy

Community initiatives that foster social cohesion and provide structured, prosocial activities reflect social control theory's emphasis on involvement and commitment. Policies that improve neighborhood stability, education, and employment opportunities also align with the theory's focus on social bonds as protective factors.

Criminal Justice System

Social control theory influences rehabilitative approaches that prioritize restoring connections between offenders and society, rather than focusing solely on punishment. Programs that encourage family reunification, education, and employment assistance for offenders reflect this theoretical perspective.

Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its widespread influence, social control theory has faced several criticisms and limitations. Some scholars argue that the theory oversimplifies the complex causes of deviance by focusing predominantly on social bonds while neglecting other factors such as economic inequality, psychological traits, and cultural influences.

Overemphasis on Social Bonds

Critics contend that social control theory assumes that weak social bonds inevitably lead to deviance, overlooking instances where individuals with strong attachments commit crimes or where people without strong bonds conform to social norms.

Lack of Consideration for Structural Factors

The theory has been criticized for insufficiently addressing broader social and economic structures that

influence behavior, such as poverty, discrimination, and systemic injustice.

Ambiguity in Measuring Social Bonds

Operationalizing and measuring the strength of social bonds poses methodological challenges, which can affect the empirical testing and validation of the theory.

Contemporary Relevance and Research

Social control theory continues to be a vital framework in understanding social behavior and crime prevention in contemporary research. Recent studies have extended the theory to explore digital social bonds, the role of social media, and community networks in shaping conformity and deviance.

Integration with Other Theories

Modern criminological research often integrates social control theory with other perspectives, such as strain theory and differential association theory, to provide a more comprehensive explanation of criminal behavior.

Policy Implications

The ongoing relevance of social control theory is reflected in policies aimed at early intervention, community building, and social support systems. Emphasizing the development and maintenance of positive social bonds remains a cornerstone in crime reduction strategies.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is social control theory in sociology?

Social control theory is a sociological perspective that explains crime and deviance as a result of weakened social bonds and the failure of individuals to conform to societal norms and rules.

Who developed the social control theory?

Social control theory was primarily developed by Travis Hirschi in 1969, who emphasized the role of social bonds in preventing deviant behavior.

What are the main elements of social bonds in social control theory?

The main elements of social bonds in social control theory are attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, which together help individuals conform to societal norms.

How does social control theory explain deviant behavior?

According to social control theory, deviant behavior occurs when an individual's ties to society are weak or broken, leading to less restraint against violating social norms.

What role does attachment play in social control theory?

Attachment refers to the emotional and social connections an individual has with others, such as family and friends, which encourage conformity to social norms.

Can social control theory be applied to understand juvenile delinquency?

Yes, social control theory is often used to understand juvenile delinquency by examining how weak social bonds with family, schools, and communities contribute to delinquent behavior.

How does involvement in activities influence social control according to the theory?

Involvement in conventional activities occupies an individual's time and energy, reducing opportunities for deviance and strengthening social bonds.

What criticisms exist regarding social control theory?

Critics argue that social control theory oversimplifies the causes of deviance by focusing mainly on social bonds and neglecting other factors like social inequality and individual agency.

How is social control theory relevant in today's digital society?

In today's digital society, social control theory remains relevant as online social bonds and community ties influence individuals' conformity and deviant behaviors in virtual environments.

Additional Resources

1. *Causes of Delinquency* by Travis Hirschi

This foundational book introduces social control theory, emphasizing the role of social bonds in preventing delinquent behavior. Hirschi argues that individuals with strong attachments to family, school, and community are less likely to engage in crime. The work is pivotal in criminology for shifting the focus from why people commit crimes to why they conform.

2. *Social Control Theory and the Life Course* by Sampson and Laub

This book expands on traditional social control theory by integrating life course perspectives. It explores how social bonds fluctuate over time and how these changes impact criminal behavior. The authors use longitudinal data to demonstrate that strong social ties in adulthood can lead to desistance from crime.

3. *Delinquency and Drift* by David Matza

Matza challenges rigid views of juvenile delinquency, proposing that youths drift between conformity and delinquency. The book discusses how social controls influence this drift and how individuals use techniques of neutralization to justify deviant acts. It adds nuance to understanding social control mechanisms.

4. *Social Bonds and Crime* by Michael Gottfredson

This text provides an in-depth analysis of the components of social bonds—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—and their role in crime prevention. Gottfredson emphasizes the importance of self-control developed through socialization. The book is a comprehensive review of social control theory's empirical support.

5. *Control Balance: Toward a General Theory of Deviance* by Charles Tittle

Tittle introduces the control balance theory, which builds on social control ideas by focusing on the balance of control experienced by individuals. The book examines how excess or lack of control can lead to deviant behavior. It broadens the theoretical framework of social control by incorporating power dynamics.

6. *Social Control and Social Order* by John Braithwaite

Braithwaite explores the mechanisms through which societies maintain order through social control. The book discusses reintegrative shaming and its effectiveness in reducing crime. It highlights the interplay between formal and informal social controls in regulating behavior.

7. *Crime and Human Nature* by James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein

This work integrates biological, psychological, and social factors, including social control theory, to explain criminal behavior. It emphasizes the role of social bonds and self-control in preventing crime. The book is influential in broadening the understanding of the causes of crime.

8. *The Social Control of Emotions* by Arlie Hochschild

Hochschild examines how social control extends beyond behavior to the regulation of emotions. Though not focused solely on crime, the book provides insights into how societal norms shape emotional expression and control. It offers a unique perspective relevant to understanding social

control theory's broader applications.

9. *Reconsidering Social Control* edited by Ian Loader and Rod Morgan

This edited volume revisits social control theory in contemporary contexts, including globalization and changing social dynamics. Contributors analyze the theory's applicability to modern issues such as surveillance and risk management. The book encourages critical reflection on traditional social control concepts.

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social control theory: *Control Theories of Crime and Delinquency* Chester L. Britt, Michael R. Gottfredson, 2011-12-31 For the past twenty to thirty years, control theories of crime have been at the center of theoretical development in criminology. Key to the control theory perspective is the notion that crime is an inherently individual act, and its explanation requires that we focus on the characteristics of individuals who commit crimes. Consequently, control theory focuses on such issues as self-control and social control. The contributions to this volume explicate and extend the application of control theory. It is divided into three general areas. Part 1 focuses on key assumptions and components of control theories. Contributors discuss the notion of learning, or socialization, in the context of control theory and the effects that families, peers, and the criminal justice system have on self-control, social ties, and criminal behavior. Part 2 applies control theory to areas typically assumed to be out of the domain of self-control theory and social control theory, such as gender differences in crime, domestic violence, and group crime. Considering control theory's emphasis on explaining individual criminal acts, these chapters suggest an interesting area of development by highlighting the possibility that differences in crime across or within groups may begin with individual characteristics and then making inferences about groups and group processes. Part 3 approaches the explanation of crime cross-nationally and at the macro-level. Although the authors take different approaches, they all illustrate that a theory of crime does not require culture-specific elements in order to be a valid cross-cultural explanation. Contributors to this volume include: Robert Agnew, Todd Armstrong, Leana Allen Bouffard, Augustine Brannigan, Chester Britt, Barbara Costello, Maja Dekovic, Matt DeLisi, Michael Gottfredson, Henriette Haas, Kelly H. Hardwick, Travis Hirschi, Marianne Junger, Martin Killias, Helen Mederer, Kevin Thompson, and Alexander Vazsonyi.

social control theory: *Social Control and Self-Control Theories of Crime and Deviance* L. Edward Wells, 2017-07-05 Control theories have dominated criminological theory and research since the 1969 publication of Hirschi's seminal work on the social bond. Social control and self-control theorists are unique in suggesting that patterns in criminal behaviors are better explained by variations in social constraints rather than by individual motivational impulses, thus

indicating that their main concerns are the explication and clarification of the techniques, processes, and institutions of informal social control. The four major sections of this volume focus on: the similarities and differences among the major contributors to the early developmental stage of social control theory; the central importance of parents, peers, and schools in the creation of informal control mechanisms and their link to crime and delinquency; the theoretical underpinnings of self-control theory, including empirical tests and criticisms; and theoretical integrations of social control and self-control theories with various motivational theories of crime and delinquency.

social control theory: Fifty Years of Causes of Delinquency, Volume 25 James C. Oleson, Barbara J. Costello, 2019-11-19 This volume marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Travis Hirschi's seminal work *Causes of Delinquency*. The influence of Hirschi's book, and the theory of social control it described, can scarcely be overstated. Social control theory has been empirically tested or commented on by hundreds of scholars and is generally regarded as one of the three dominant theories of crime. The current work highlights the impact that social control theory has had on criminological theory and research to date. Agnew's contribution highlights the role that Hirschi's tests of control versus strain theory had in contributing to the near demise of classic strain theories, and to the subsequent development of general strain theory. Serrano-Maillo relates control to drift, and Tedor and Hope compare the human nature assumptions of control theory to the current psychological literature. Other contributions return to Hirschi's original Richmond Youth Survey (RYS) data and demonstrate the robustness of Hirschi's major findings. Costello and Anderson find strong support for Hirschi's predictions in an analysis of a diverse group of youths in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 1999; Nofziger similarly finds support for Hirschi's predictions with an analysis of the girls in the RYS, and explores the criticisms of social control theory that were the result of Hirschi's failure to analyze the data from the girls in the sample. Kempf-Leonard revisits her seminal 1993 survey of control theory and reviews the current empirical status of control theory. Other contributions explore new directions for both social control theory and self-control theory. The contribution by Cullen, Lee, and Butler holds that one element of the social bond, commitment, was under-theorized by Hirschi, and the authors present a more in-depth development of the concept. Quist explores the possibility of expanding social control theory to explicitly incorporate exchange theory concepts; Ueda and Tsutomi apply control theory cross-culturally to a sample of Japanese students; and Felson uses control theory to organize criminological ideas. Vazsonyi and Javakhishvili's contribution is an empirical analysis of the connections between social control in early childhood and self-control later in life; Chapple and McQuillan's contribution suggests that the gender gap in delinquency is better explained by increased controls in girls than by gendered pathways to offending. Oleson traces the evolution of Hirschi's control theory, and suggests that, given the relationships between fact and theory, a biosocial model of control might be a promising line of inquiry. *Fifty Years of Causes of Delinquency: The Criminology of Travis Hirschi* describes the current state of control theory and suggests its future directions, as well as demonstrates its enduring importance for criminological theory and research. The volume will be of interest to scholars working in the control theory tradition as well as those critical of the perspective, and is suitable for use in graduate courses in criminological theory.

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and the Limits of Criminal Justice, Gottfredson and Hirschi develop and extend the theory of self control advanced in their classic work. Focusing on the methodology of testing crime theory and measuring behavioral research on crime and delinquency, they critically review the evidence about self control theory. Gottfredson and Hirschi further discuss evidence about the positive consequences of higher levels of self control from education, economics, and public health, that-along with evidence from delinquency and crime-show substantial support for the theory of self control. Illustrating the theory through predictions about policing, incarceration, juvenile justice, and the connection of immigration policy to crime, this book connects self control theory to the structure and function of the criminal justice system, then applies the theory to pressing issues of public policy about delinquency and crime.

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social control theory: Social Control Theory and Delinquency, 1978 The concept of social control has been used in sociology since the foundations of the discipline were laid almost a hundred years ago. At the turn of the century social control developed two distinct orientations. The concept has referred to the process of socialization or how individual behavior is regulated in primary group relations, and alternatively, to how the large macrosocial institutions such as education, religion, law and the political system maintain order in society. Early research in social control focused on the development of inventories of societal means of social control. Changing standards of science, however, forced an abandonment of that perspective and research became more directly concerned with the socialization process. Most recently, social control arguments have centered upon the primary group aspects of socialization and the relation of that socialization to delinquency and have been unattentive to larger social institutions and secondary group factors that also influence

behavior. The version of social control theory developed by Travis Hirschi in *Causes of Delinquency* (1969) has been shown to be an exemplary model of social research. He claimed that in early childhood many youths form a bond to society which prevents some of them from becoming involved with delinquency while others who fail to form a bond become delinquent. Hirschi's theory was strongly supported by the research he conducted which showed that delinquency involvement was inversely related to the strength of an individual's relationship to society. Despite the importance of Hirschi's research there is mounting evidence that various institutional experiences such as tracking and grading in school operate as contingencies experienced by adolescents which affect their ability to pursue the legitimate careers which is central to Hirschi's thesis and which may force some youths into patterns of delinquent behavior. Similarly, youngsters who come from different positions in the class structure may vary in their likelihood of obtaining access to high status positions or conversely participating in delinquency if they fail. Yet the impacts of educational policies and the effects of social class background have not been incorporated into social control arguments. This dissertation extends the explanatory model developed by Hirschi. First, it argues that the socialization levels reached by youngsters in primary group socialization are sometimes altered by subsequent experiences. Secondly, it contends that those changes are related to school experiences and social class backgrounds of youths. Finally, it avers that those changes increase or decrease the likelihood that adolescents will become involved in delinquent behavior. The data for this research was obtained from the Marion County Youth Study, an ongoing survey of a panel of male youths who were high school juniors in 1964. A twenty-five percent random sample of the panel in 1967 comprised the group used in this research. The group's 1964 responses were identified, and this served as the basis for the data analysis. The first part replicated Hirschi's contentions that the bond was formed in the family. One element, not formed in 1964, emerged prior to the youth's graduation. Secondly, this research diverged from Hirschi's contention that social class was not related to the levels of bond achieved by youths or delinquency. Delinquency and two of the four elements of the bond were found to be related to social class. Third, the social bond was found to be moderately unstable and change was somewhat related to the educational and social background of the youth. Finally, these changes in bond and secondary group factors were translated into significant variations in the delinquency rates for the youths who comprised the analysis groups.

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