

Low Self-Control and Crime*

MICHAEL R. GOTTFREDSON AND TRAVIS HIRSCHI

Theories of crime lead naturally to interest in the propensities of individuals committing criminal acts. These propensities are often labeled "criminality." In pure classical theory, people committing criminal acts had no special propensities. They merely followed the universal tendency to enhance their own pleasure. If they differed from noncriminals, it was with respect to their location in or comprehension of relevant sanction systems. For example, the individual cut off from the community will suffer less than others from the ostracism that follows crime; the individual unaware of the natural or legal consequences of criminal behavior cannot be controlled by these consequences to the degree that people aware of them are controlled; the atheist will not be as concerned as the believer about penalties to be exacted in a life beyond death. Classical theories on the whole, then, are today called *control* theories, theories emphasizing the prevention of crime through consequences painful to the individual.

Although, for policy purposes, classical theorists emphasized legal consequences, the importance to them of moral sanctions is so obvious that their theories might well be called underdeveloped *social control* theories. In fact, Bentham's list of the major restraining motives—motives acting to prevent mischievous acts—begins with goodwill, love of reputation, and the desire for amity (1970: 134–36). He goes on to say that fear of detection prevents crime in large part because of detection's consequences for "reputation, and the desire for amity" (p. 138). Put another way, in Bentham's view, the restraining power of legal sanctions in large part stems from their connection to social sanctions.

If crime is evidence of the weakness of social motives, it follows that criminals are less social

than noncriminals and that the extent of their asociality may be determined by the nature and number of their crimes. Calculation of the extent of an individual's mischievousness is a complex affair, but in general the more mischievous or depraved the offenses, and the greater their number, the more mischievous or depraved the offender (Bentham 1970: 134–42). (Classical theorists thus had reason to be interested in the seriousness of the offense. The relevance of seriousness to current theories of crime is not so clear.)

Because classical or control theories infer that offenders are not restrained by social motives, it is common to think of them as emphasizing an asocial human nature. Actually, such theories make people only as asocial as their acts require. Pure or consistent control theories do not add criminality (i.e., personality concepts or attributes such as "aggressiveness" or "extraversion") to individuals beyond that found in their criminal acts. As a result, control theories are suspicious of images of an antisocial, psychopathic, or career offender, or of an offender whose motives to crime are somehow larger than those given in the crimes themselves. Indeed, control theories are compatible with the view that the balance of the total control structure favors conformity, even among offenders:

For in every man, be his disposition ever so depraved, the social motives are those which . . . regulate and determine the general tenor of his life. . . . The general and standing bias of every man's nature is, therefore, towards that side to which the force of the social motives would determine him to adhere. This being the case, the force of the social motives tends continually to put an end to that of the dissocial ones; as, in natural bodies, the force of friction tends to put an end to that which is generated by impulse. Time, then, which wears away the force of the dissocial motives, adds to that of the social. [Bentham 1970: 141]

Positivism brought with it the idea that criminals differ from noncriminals in ways more radical than this, the idea that criminals carry within

*Adapted from Michael R. Gottfredson, and Travis Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime*, Chapter 5, "The Nature of Criminality: Low Self-Control," pp. 85–120. Copyright © 1990 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Used with the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.

themselves properties peculiarly and positively conducive to crime. In [earlier chapters not reprinted here], we examined the efforts of the major disciplines to identify these properties. Being friendly to both the classical and positivist traditions, we expected to end up with a list of individual properties reliably identified by competent research as useful in the description of "criminality"—such properties as aggressiveness, body build, activity level, and intelligence. We further expected that we would be able to connect these individual-level correlates of criminality directly to the classical idea of crime. As our review progressed, however, we were forced to conclude that we had overestimated the success of positivism in establishing important differences between "criminals" and "noncriminals" beyond their tendency to commit criminal acts. Stable individual differences in the tendency to commit criminal acts were clearly evident, but many or even most of the other differences between offenders and nonoffenders were not as clear or pronounced as our reading of the literature had led us to expect.¹

If individual differences in the tendency to commit criminal acts (within an overall tendency for crime to decline with age) are at least potentially explicable within classical theory by reference to the social location of individuals and their comprehension of how the world works, the fact remains that classical theory cannot shed much light on the positivistic finding (denied by most positivistic theories... that these differences *remain reasonably stable with change in the social location of individuals and change in their knowledge of the operation of sanction systems*). This is the problem of self-control, the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves. Since this difference among people has attracted a variety of names, we begin by arguing the merits of the concept of self-control.

Self-Control and Alternative Concepts

Our decision to ascribe stable individual differences in criminal behavior to self-control was made only after considering several alternatives,

one of which (criminality) we had used before (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986). A major consideration was consistency between the classical conception of crime and our conception of the criminal. It seemed unwise to try to integrate a choice theory of crime with a deterministic image of the offender, especially when such integration was unnecessary. In fact, the compatibility of the classical view of crime and the idea that people differ in self-control is, in our view, remarkable. As we have seen, classical theory is a theory of social or external control, a theory based on the idea that the costs of crime depend on the individual's current location in or bond to society. What classical theory lacks is an explicit idea of self-control, the idea that people also differ in the extent to which they are vulnerable to the temptations of the moment. Combining the two ideas thus merely recognizes the simultaneous existence of social and individual restraints on behavior.

An obvious alternative is the concept of criminality. The disadvantages of that concept, however, are numerous. First, it connotes causation or determinism, a positive tendency to crime that is contrary to the classical model and, in our view, contrary to the facts. Whereas self-control suggests that people differ in the extent to which they are restrained from criminal acts, criminality suggests that people differ in the extent to which they are compelled to crime. The concept of self-control is thus consistent with the observation that criminals do not require or need crime, and the concept of criminality is inconsistent with this observation. By the same token, the idea of low self-control is compatible with the observation that criminal acts require no special capabilities, needs, or motivation; they are, in this sense, available to everyone. In contrast, the idea of criminality as a special tendency suggests that criminal acts require special people for their performance and enjoyment. Finally, lack of restraint or low self-control allows almost any deviant, criminal, exciting, or dangerous act; in contrast, the idea of criminality covers only a narrow portion of the apparently diverse acts engaged in by people at one end of the dimension we are now discussing.

The concept of conscience comes closer than criminality to self-control, and is harder to

distinguish from it. Unfortunately, that concept has connotations of compulsion (to conformity) not, strictly speaking, consistent with a choice model (or with the operation of conscience). It does not seem to cover the behaviors analogous to crime that appear to be controlled by natural sanctions rather than social or moral sanctions, and in the end it typically refers to how people feel about their acts rather than to the likelihood that they will or will not commit them. Thus accidents and employment instability are not usually seen as produced by failures of conscience, and writers in the conscience tradition do not typically make the connection between moral and prudent behavior. Finally, conscience is used primarily to summarize the results of learning via negative reinforcement, and even those favorably disposed to its use have little more to say about it (see, e.g., Eysenck 1977; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985).

We are now in position to describe the nature of self-control, the individual characteristic relevant to the commission of criminal acts. We assume that the nature of this characteristic can be derived directly from the nature of criminal acts. We thus infer from the nature of crime what people who refrain from criminal acts are like before they reach the age at which crime becomes a logical possibility. We then work back further to the factors producing their restraint, back to the causes of self-control. In our view, lack of self-control does not require crime and can be counteracted by situational conditions or other properties of the individual. At the same time, we suggest that high self-control effectively reduces the possibility of crime—that is, those possessing it will be substantially less likely at all periods of life to engage in criminal acts.

The Elements of Self-Control

- * Criminal acts provide *immediate* gratification of desires. A major characteristic of people with low self-control is therefore a tendency to respond to tangible stimuli in the immediate environment, to have a concrete “here and now” orientation. People with high self-control, in contrast, tend to defer gratification.

Criminal acts provide *easy or simple* gratification of desires. They provide money without work,

sex without courtship, revenge without court delays. People lacking self-control also tend to lack diligence, tenacity, or persistence in a course of action.

Criminal acts are *exciting, risky, or thrilling*. They involve stealth, danger, speed, agility, deception, or power. People lacking self-control therefore tend to be adventuresome, active, and physical. Those with high levels of self-control tend to be cautious, cognitive, and verbal.

Crimes provide *few or meager long-term benefits*. They are not equivalent to a job or a career. On the contrary, crimes interfere with long-term commitments to jobs, marriages, family, or friends. People with low self-control thus tend to have unstable marriages, friendships, and job profiles. They tend to be little interested in and unprepared for long-term occupational pursuits.

Crimes require *little skill or planning*. The cognitive requirements for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess or value cognitive or academic skills. The manual skills required for most crimes are minimal. It follows that people lacking self-control need not possess manual skills that require training or apprenticeship.

Crimes often result in *pain or discomfort for the victim*. Property is lost, bodies are injured, privacy is violated, trust is broken. It follows that people with low self-control tend to be self-centered, indifferent, or insensitive to the suffering and needs of others. It does not follow, however, that people with low self-control are routinely unkind or antisocial. On the contrary, they may discover the immediate and easy rewards of charm and generosity.

Recall that crime involves the pursuit of immediate pleasure. It follows that people lacking self-control will also tend to pursue immediate pleasures that are *not* criminal: they will tend to smoke, drink, use drugs, gamble, have children out of wedlock, and engage in illicit sex.

Crimes require the interaction of an offender with people or their property. It does not follow that people lacking self-control will tend to be gregarious or social. However, it does follow that, other things being equal, gregarious or social people are more likely to be involved in criminal acts.

The major benefit of many crimes is not pleasure but relief from momentary irritation. The

irritation caused by a crying child is often the stimulus for physical abuse. That caused by a taunting stranger in a bar is often the stimulus for aggravated assault. It follows that people with low self-control tend to have minimal tolerance for frustration and little ability to respond to conflict through verbal rather than physical means.

Crimes involve the risk of violence and physical injury, of pain and suffering on the part of the offender. It does not follow that people with low self-control will tend to be tolerant of physical pain or to be indifferent to physical discomfort. It does follow that people tolerant of physical pain or indifferent to physical discomfort will be more likely to engage in criminal acts whatever their level of self-control.

The risk of criminal penalty for any given criminal act is small, but this depends in part on the circumstances of the offense. Thus, for example, not all joyrides by teenagers are equally likely to result in arrest. A car stolen from a neighbor and returned unharmed before he notices its absence is less likely to result in official notice than is a car stolen from a shopping center parking lot and abandoned at the convenience of the offender. Drinking alcohol stolen from parents and consumed in the family garage is less likely to receive official notice than drinking in the parking lot outside a concert hall. It follows that offenses differ in their validity as measures of self-control: those offenses with large risk of public awareness are better measures than those with little risk.

In sum, people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and non-verbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts. Since these traits can be identified prior to the age of responsibility for crime, since there is considerable tendency for these traits to come together in the same people, and since the traits tend to persist through life, it seems reasonable to consider them as comprising a stable construct useful in the explanation of crime.

The Many Manifestations of Low Self-Control

Our image of the "offender" suggests that crime is not an automatic or necessary consequence of low self-control. It suggests that many noncriminal

acts analogous to crime (such as accidents, smoking, and alcohol use) are also manifestations of low self-control. Our image therefore implies that no specific act, type of crime, or form of deviance is uniquely required by the absence of self-control.

Because both crime and analogous behaviors stem from low self-control (that is, both are manifestations of low self-control), they will all be engaged in at a relatively high rate by people with low self-control. Within the domain of crime, then, there will be much versatility among offenders in the criminal acts in which they engage.

Research on the versatility of deviant acts supports these predictions in the strongest possible way. The variety of manifestations of low self-control is immense. In spite of years of tireless research motivated by a belief in specialization, no credible evidence of specialization has been reported. In fact, the evidence of offender versatility is overwhelming (Hirschi 1969; Hindelang 1971; Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972; Petersilia 1980; Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981; Rojek and Erickson 1982; Klein 1984).

By versatility we mean that offenders commit a wide variety of criminal acts, with no strong inclination to pursue a specific criminal act or a pattern of criminal acts to the exclusion of others. Most theories suggest that offenders tend to specialize, whereby such terms as robber, burglar, drug dealer, rapist, and murderer have predictive or descriptive import. In fact, some theories create offender specialization as part of their explanation of crime. For example, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) create distinctive subcultures of delinquency around particular forms of criminal behavior, identifying subcultures specializing in theft, violence, or drugs. In a related way, books are written about white-collar crime as though it were a clearly distinct specialty requiring a unique explanation. Research projects are undertaken for the study of drug use, or vandalism, or teen pregnancy (as though every study of delinquency were not a study of drug use and vandalism and teenage sexual behavior). Entire schools of criminology emerge to pursue patterning, sequencing, progression, escalation, onset, persistence, and desistance in the career of offenses or offenders. These efforts survive largely because their proponents fail to consider or acknowledge

the clear evidence to the contrary. Other reasons for survival of such ideas may be found in the interest of politicians and members of the law enforcement community who see policy potential in criminal careers or "career criminals" (see, e.g., Blumstein et al. 1986).

Occasional reports of specialization seem to contradict this point, as do everyday observations of repetitive misbehavior by particular offenders. Some offenders rob the same store repeatedly over a period of years, or an offender commits several rapes over a (brief) period of time. Such offenders may be called "robbers" or "rapists." However, it should be noted that such labels are retrospective rather than predictive and that they typically ignore a large amount of delinquent or criminal behavior by the same offenders that is inconsistent with their alleged specialty. Thus, for example, the "rapist" will tend also to use drugs, to commit robberies and burglaries (often in concert with the rape), and to have a record for violent offenses other than rape. There is a perhaps natural tendency on the part of observers (and in official accounts) to focus on the most serious crimes in a series of events, but this tendency should not be confused with a tendency on the part of the offender to specialize in one kind of crime.

Recall that one of the defining features of crime is that it is simple and easy. Some apparent specialization will therefore occur because obvious opportunities for an easy score will tend to repeat themselves. An offender who lives next to a shopping area that is approached by pedestrians will have repeat opportunities for purse snatching, and this may show in his arrest record. But even here the specific "criminal career" will tend to quickly run its course and to be followed by offenses whose content and character is likewise determined by convenience and opportunity (which is the reason why some form of theft is always the best bet about what a person is likely to do next).

The evidence that offenders are likely to engage in noncriminal acts psychologically or theoretically equivalent to crime is, because of the relatively high rates of these "noncriminal" acts, even easier to document. Thieves are likely to smoke, drink, and skip school at considerably higher rates than nonthieves. Offenders are considerably more likely than nonoffenders to be involved in

most types of accidents, including household fires, auto crashes, and unwanted pregnancies. They are also considerably more likely to die at an early age (see, e.g., Robins 1966; Eysenck 1977; Gottfredson 1984).

Good research on drug use and abuse routinely reveals that the correlates of delinquency and drug use are the same. As Akers (1984) has noted, "compared to the abstaining teenager, the drinking, smoking, and drug-taking teen is much more likely to be getting into fights, stealing, hurting other people, and committing other delinquencies." Akers goes on to say, "but the variation in the order in which they take up these things leaves little basis for proposing the causation of one by the other." In our view, the relation between drug use and delinquency is not a causal question. The correlates are the same because drug use and delinquency are both manifestations of an underlying tendency to pursue short-term, immediate pleasure. This underlying tendency (i.e., lack of self-control) has many manifestations, as listed by Harrison Gough (1948):

unconcern over the rights and privileges of others when recognizing them would interfere with personal satisfaction in any way; impulsive behavior, or apparent incongruity between the strength of the stimulus and the magnitude of the behavioral response; inability to form deep or persistent attachments to other persons or to identify in interpersonal relationships; poor judgment and planning in attaining defined goals; apparent lack of anxiety and distress over social maladjustment and unwillingness or inability to consider maladjustment *qua* maladjustment; a tendency to project blame onto others and to take no responsibility for failures; meaningless prevarication, often about trivial matters in situations where detection is inevitable; almost complete lack of dependability . . . and willingness to assume responsibility; and, finally, emotional poverty. [p. 362]

This combination of characteristics has been revealed in the life histories of the subjects in the famous studies by Lee Robins. Robins is one of the few researchers to focus on the varieties of deviance and the way they tend to go together in the lives of those she designates as having "antisocial personalities." In her words: "We refer to someone who fails to maintain close personal relationships with anyone else, [who] performs poorly on the

job, who is involved in illegal behaviors (whether or not apprehended), who fails to support himself and his dependents without outside aid, and who is given to sudden changes of plan and loss of temper in response to what appear to others as minor frustrations" (1978: 255).

For 30 years Robins traced 524 children referred to a guidance clinic in St. Louis, Missouri, and she compared them to a control group matched on IQ, age, sex, and area of the city. She discovered that, in comparison to the control group, those people referred at an early age were more likely to be arrested as adults (for a wide variety of offenses), were less likely to get married, were more likely to be divorced, were more likely to marry a spouse with a behavior problem, were less likely to have children (but if they had children were likely to have more children), were more likely to have children with behavior problems, were more likely to be unemployed, had considerably more frequent job changes, were more likely to be on welfare, had fewer contacts with relatives, had fewer friends, were substantially less likely to attend church, were less likely to serve in the armed forces and more likely to be dishonorably discharged if they did serve, were more likely to exhibit physical evidence of excessive alcohol use, and were more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric problems (1966: 42-73).

Note that these outcomes are consistent with four general elements of our notion of low self-control: basic stability of individual differences over a long period of time; great variability in the kinds of criminal acts engaged in; conceptual or causal equivalence of criminal and noncriminal acts; and inability to predict the specific forms of deviance engaged in, whether criminal or non-criminal. In our view, the idea of an antisocial personality defined by certain behavioral consequences is too positivistic or deterministic, suggesting that the offender must do certain things given his antisocial personality. Thus we would say only that the subjects in question are *more likely* to commit criminal acts (as the data indicate they are). We do not make commission of criminal acts part of the definition of the individual with low self-control.

Be this as it may, Robin's retrospective research shows that predictions derived from a

concept of antisocial personality are highly consistent with the results of prospective longitudinal and cross-sectional research: offenders do not specialize; they tend to be involved in accidents, illness, and death at higher rates than the general population; they tend to have difficulty persisting in a job regardless of the particular characteristics of the job (no job will turn out to be a good job); they have difficulty acquiring and retaining friends; and they have difficulty meeting the demands of long-term financial commitments (such as mortgages or car payments) and the demands of parenting.

Seen in this light, the "costs" of low self-control for the individual may far exceed the costs of his criminal acts. In fact, it appears that crime is often among the least serious consequences of a lack of self-control in terms of the quality of life of those lacking it.

The Causes of Self-Control

We know better what deficiencies in self-control lead to than where they come from. One thing is, however, clear: low self-control is not produced by training, tutelage, or socialization. As a matter of fact, all of the characteristics associated with low self-control tend to show themselves in the absence of nurturance, discipline, or training. Given the classical appreciation of the causes of human behavior, the implications of this fact are straightforward: the causes of low self-control are negative rather than positive; self-control is unlikely in the absence of effort, intended or unintended, to create it. (This assumption separates the present theory from most modern theories of crime, where the offender is automatically seen as a product of positive forces, a creature of learning, particular pressures, or specific defect. We will return to this comparison once our theory has been fully explicated.)

At this point it would be easy to construct a theory of crime causation, according to which characteristics of potential offenders lead them ineluctably to the commission of criminal acts. Our task at this point would simply be to identify the likely sources of impulsiveness, intelligence, risk-taking, and the like. But to do so would be to follow the path that has proven so unproductive

in the past, the path according to which criminals commit crimes irrespective of the characteristics of the setting or situation.

We can avoid this pitfall by recalling the elements inherent in the decision to commit a criminal act. The object of the offense is clearly pleasurable, and universally so. Engaging in the act, however, entails some risk of social, legal, and/or natural sanctions. Whereas the pleasure attained by the act is direct, obvious, and immediate, the pains risked by it are not obvious, or direct, and are in any event at greater remove from it. It follows that, though there will be little variability among people in their ability to see the pleasures of crime, there will be considerable variability in their ability to calculate potential pains. But the problem goes further than this: whereas the pleasures of crime are reasonably equally distributed over the population, this is not true for the pains. Everyone appreciates money; not everyone dreads parental anger or disappointment upon learning that the money was stolen.

So, the dimensions of self-control are, in our view, factors affecting calculation of the consequences of one's acts. The impulsive or short-sighted person fails to consider the negative or painful consequences of his acts; the insensitive person has fewer negative consequences to consider; the less intelligent person also has fewer negative consequences to consider (has less to lose).

No known social group, whether criminal or noncriminal, actively or purposefully attempts to reduce the self-control of its members. Social life is not enhanced by low self-control and its consequences. On the contrary, the exhibition of these tendencies undermines harmonious group relations and the ability to achieve collective ends. These facts explicitly deny that a tendency to crime is a product of socialization, culture, or positive learning of any sort.

The traits composing low self-control are also not conducive to the achievement of long-term individual goals. On the contrary, they impede educational and occupational achievement, destroy interpersonal relations, and undermine physical health and economic well-being. Such facts explicitly deny the notion that criminality is an alternative route to the goals otherwise obtainable

through legitimate avenues. It follows that people who care about the interpersonal skill, educational and occupational achievement, and physical and economic well-being of those in their care will seek to rid them of these traits.

Two general sources of variation are immediately apparent in this scheme. The first is the variation among children in the degree to which they manifest such traits to begin with. The second is the variation among caretakers in the degree to which they recognize low self-control and its consequences and the degree to which they are willing and able to correct it. Obviously, therefore, even at this threshold level the sources of low self-control are complex.

There is good evidence that some of the traits predicting subsequent involvement in crime appear as early as they can be reliably measured, including low intelligence, high activity level, physical strength, and adventuresomeness (Glueck and Glueck 1950; West and Farrington 1973). The evidence suggests that the connection between these traits and commission of criminal acts ranges from weak to moderate. Obviously, we do not suggest that people are born criminals, inherit a gene for criminality, or anything of the sort. In fact, we explicitly deny such notions. . . . What we do suggest is that individual differences may have an impact on the prospects for effective socialization (or adequate control). Effective socialization is, however, always possible whatever the configuration of individual traits.

Other traits affecting crime appear later and seem to be largely products of ineffective or incomplete socialization. For example, differences in impulsivity and insensitivity become noticeable later in childhood when they are no longer common to all children. The ability and willingness to delay immediate gratification for some larger purpose may therefore be assumed to be a consequence of training. Much parental action is in fact geared toward suppression of impulsive behavior, toward making the child consider the long-range consequences of acts. Consistent sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others may also be assumed to be a consequence of training. Indeed, much parental behavior is directed toward teaching the child about the rights and feelings of others, and of how these rights and feelings ought

to constrain the child's behavior. All of these points focus our attention on child-rearing.

Child-Rearing and Self-Control: The Family

The major "cause" of low self-control thus appears to be ineffective child-rearing. Put in positive terms, several conditions appear necessary to produce a socialized child. Perhaps the place to begin looking for these conditions is the research literature on the relation between family conditions and delinquency. This research (e.g., Glueck and Glueck 1950; McCord and McCord 1959) has examined the connection between many family factors and delinquency. It reports that discipline, supervision, and affection tend to be missing in the homes of delinquents, that the behavior of the parents is often "poor" (e.g., excessive drinking and poor supervision [Glueck and Glueck 1950: 110-11]); and that the parents of delinquents are unusually likely to have criminal records themselves. Indeed, according to Michael Rutter and Henri Giller, "of the parental characteristics associated with delinquency, criminality is the most striking and most consistent" 1984: 182).

Such information undermines the many explanations of crime that ignore the family, but in this form it does not represent much of an advance over the belief of the general public (and those who deal with offenders in the criminal justice system) that "defective upbringing" or "neglect" in the home is the primary cause of crime.

To put these standard research findings in perspective, we think it necessary to define the conditions necessary for adequate child-rearing to occur. The minimum conditions seem to be these: in order to teach the child self-control, someone must (1) monitor the child's behavior; (2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and (3) punish such behavior. This seems simple and obvious enough. All that is required to activate the system is affection for *or* investment in the child. The person who cares for the child will watch his behavior, see him doing things he should not do, and correct him. The result may be a child more capable of delaying gratification, more sensitive to the interests and desires of others, more independent,

more willing to accept restraints on his activity, and more unlikely to use force or violence to attain his ends.

When we seek the causes of low self-control, we ask where this system can go wrong. Obviously, parents do not prefer their children to be unsocialized in the terms described. We can therefore rule out in advance the possibility of positive socialization to unsocialized behavior (as cultural or subcultural deviance theories suggest). Still, the system can go wrong at any one of four places. First, the parents may not care for the child (in which case none of the other conditions would be met); second, the parents, even if they care, may not have the time or energy to monitor the child's behavior; third, the parents, even if they care *and* monitor, may not see anything wrong with the child's behavior; finally, even if everything else is in place, the parents may not have the inclination or the means to punish the child. So, what may appear at first glance to be nonproblematic turns out to be problematic indeed. Many things can go wrong. According to much research in crime and delinquency, in the homes of problem children many things have gone wrong: "Parents of stealers do not track ([they] do not interpret stealing . . . as 'deviant'); they do not punish; and they do not care" (Patterson 1980: 88-89; see also Glueck and Glueck 1950; McCord and McCord 1959; West and Farrington 1977).

Let us apply this scheme to some of the facts about the connection between child socialization and crime, beginning with the elements of the child-rearing model.

The Attachment of the Parent to the Child

Our model states that parental concern for the welfare or behavior of the child is a necessary condition for successful child-rearing. Because it is too often assumed that all parents are alike in their love for their children, the evidence directly on this point is not as good or extensive as it could be. However, what exists is clearly consistent with the model. Glueck and Glueck (1950: 125-28) report that, compared to the fathers of delinquents, fathers of nondelinquents were

twice as likely to be warmly disposed toward their sons and one-fifth as likely to be hostile toward them. In the same sample, 28 percent of the mothers of delinquents were characterized as "indifferent or hostile" toward the child as compared to 4 percent of the mothers of nondelinquents. The evidence suggests that stepparents are especially unlikely to have feelings of affection toward their stepchildren (Burgess 1980), adding in contemporary society to the likelihood that children will be "reared" by people who do not especially care for them.

Parental Supervision

The connection between social control and self-control could not be more direct than in the case of parental supervision of the child. Such supervision presumably prevents criminal or analogous acts and at the same time trains the child to avoid them on his own. Consistent with this assumption, supervision tends to be a major predictor of delinquency, however supervision or delinquency is measured (Glueck and Glueck 1950; Hirschi 1969; West and Farrington 1977; Riley and Shaw 1985).

Our general theory in principle provides a method of separating supervision as external control from supervision as internal control. For one thing, offenses differ in the degree to which they can be prevented through monitoring; children at one age are monitored much more closely than children at other ages; girls are supervised more closely than boys. In some situations, monitoring is universal or nearly constant; in other situations monitoring for some offenses is virtually absent. In the present context, however, the concern is with the connection between supervision and self-control, a connection established by the stronger tendency of those poorly supervised when young to commit crimes as adults (McCord 1979).

Recognition of Deviant Behavior

In order for supervision to have an impact on self-control, the supervisor must perceive deviant behavior when it occurs. Remarkably, not all parents are adept at recognizing lack of self-control. Some parents allow the child to do pretty much

as he pleases without interference. Extensive television-viewing is one modern example, as is the failure to require completion of homework, to prohibit smoking, to curtail the use of physical force, or to see to it that the child actually attends school. (As noted, truancy among second-graders presumably reflects on the adequacy of parental awareness of the child's misbehavior.) Again, the research is not as good as it should be, but evidence of "poor conduct standards" in the homes of delinquents is common.

Punishment of Deviant Acts

Control theories explicitly acknowledge the necessity of sanctions in preventing criminal behavior. They do not suggest that the major sanctions are legal or corporal. On the contrary, as we have seen, they suggest that disapproval by people one cares about is the most powerful of sanctions. Effective punishment by the parent or major caretaker therefore usually entails nothing more than explicit disapproval of unwanted behavior. The criticism of control theories that dwells on their alleged cruelty is therefore simply misguided or ill informed (see, e.g., Currie 1985).

Not all caretakers punish effectively. In fact, some are too harsh and some are too lenient (Glueck and Glueck 1950; McCord and McCord 1959; West and Farrington 1977; see generally Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1986). Given our model, however, rewarding good behavior cannot compensate for failure to correct deviant behavior. (Recall that, in our view, deviant acts carry with them their own rewards. . . .)

Given the consistency of the child-rearing model with our general theory and with the research literature, it should be possible to use it to explain other family correlates of criminal and otherwise deviant behavior.

Parental Criminality

Our theory focuses on the connection between the self-control of the parent and the subsequent self-control of the child. There is good reason to expect, and the data confirm, that people lacking self-control do not socialize their children well.

According to Donald West and David Farrington, "the fact that delinquency is transmitted from one generation to the next is indisputable" (1977: 109; see also Robins 1966). Of course our theory does not allow transmission of criminality, genetic or otherwise. However, it does allow us to predict that some people are more likely than others to fail to socialize their children and that this will be a consequence of their own inadequate socialization. The extent of this connection between parent and child socialization is revealed by the fact that in the West and Farrington study fewer than 5 percent of the families accounted for almost half of the criminal convictions in the entire sample. (In our view, this finding is more important for the theory of crime, and for public policy, than the much better-known finding of Wolfgang and his colleagues [1972] that something like 6 percent of *individual* offenders account for about half of all criminal acts.) In order to achieve such concentration of crime in a small number of families, it is necessary that the parents and the brothers and sisters of offenders also be unusually likely to commit criminal acts.²

Why should the children of offenders be unusually vulnerable to crime? Recall that our theory assumes that criminality is not something the parents have to work to produce; on the contrary, it assumes that criminality is something they have to work to avoid. Consistent with this view, parents with criminal records do *not* encourage crime in their children and are in fact as disapproving of it as parents with no record of criminal involvement (West and Farrington 1977). Of course, not wanting criminal behavior in one's children and being upset when it occurs do not necessarily imply that great effort has been expended to prevent it. If criminal behavior is oriented toward short-term rewards, and if child-rearing is oriented toward long-term rewards, there is little reason to expect parents themselves lacking self-control to be particularly adept at instilling self-control in their children.

Consistent with this expectation, research consistently indicates that the supervision of delinquents in families where parents have criminal records tends to be "lax," "inadequate," or "poor." Punishment in these families also tends

to be easy, short-term, and insensitive—that is, yelling and screaming, slapping and hitting, with threats that are not carried out.

Such facts do not, however, completely account for the concentration of criminality among some families. A major reason for this failure is probably that the most subtle element of child-rearing is not included in the analysis. This is the element of *recognition* of deviant behavior. According to Gerald Patterson (1980), many parents do not even recognize *criminal* behavior in their children, let alone the minor forms of deviance whose punishment is necessary for effective child-rearing. For example, when children steal outside the home, some parents discount reports that they have done so on the grounds that the charges are unproved and cannot therefore be used to justify punishment. By the same token, when children are suspended for misbehavior at school, some parents side with the child and blame the episode on prejudicial mistreatment by teachers. Obviously, parents who cannot see the misbehavior of their children are in no position to correct it, even if they are inclined to do so.

Given that recognition of deviant acts is a necessary component of the child-rearing model, research is needed on the question of what parents should and should not recognize as deviant behavior if they are to prevent criminality. To the extent our theory is correct, parents need to know behaviors that reflect low self-control. That many parents are not now attentive to such behaviors should come as no surprise. The idea that criminal behavior is the product of deprivation or positive learning dominates modern theory. As a consequence, most influential social scientific theories of crime and delinquency ignore or deny the connection between crime and talking back, yelling, pushing and shoving, insisting on getting one's way, trouble in school, and poor school performance. Little wonder, then, that some parents do not see the significance of such acts. Research now makes it clear that parents differ in their reaction to these behaviors, with some parents attempting to correct behaviors that others ignore or even defend (Patterson 1980). Because social science in general sees little connection between these acts and crime, there has been little systematic integration of the child development and

criminological literatures. Furthermore, because the conventional wisdom disputes the connection between child training and crime, public policy has not focused on it. We do not argue that crime is caused by these early misbehaviors. Instead, we argue that such behaviors indicate the presence of the major individual-level cause of crime, a cause that in principle may be attacked by punishing these early manifestations. Nor do we argue that criminal acts automatically follow early evidence of low self-control. Because crime requires more than low self-control, some parents are lucky and have children with low self-control who still manage to avoid acts that would bring them to the attention of the criminal justice system. It is less likely (in fact unlikely), however, that such children will avoid altogether behavior indicative of low self-control. Put another way, low self-control predicts low self-control better than it predicts any of its specific manifestations, such as crime.

Family Size

One of the most consistent findings of delinquency research is that the larger the number of children in the family, the greater the likelihood that each of them will be delinquent. This finding, too, is perfectly explicable from a child-rearing model. Affection for the individual child may be unaffected by numbers, and parents with large families may be as able as anyone else to recognize deviant behavior, but monitoring and punishment are probably more difficult the greater the number of children in the family. Greater numbers strain parental resources of time and energy. For this reason, the child in the large family is likely to spend more time with other children and less time with adults. Children are not as likely as adults to be effective trainers. They have less investment in the outcome, are more likely to be tolerant of deviant behavior, and do not have the power to enforce their edicts.

If the analysis of criminality of parents and size of family is sufficient to establish the plausibility of our child-rearing explanation, we can now attempt to apply it to some of the more problematic issues in the connection between the family and crime.

The Single-Parent Family

Such family measures as the percentage of the population divorced, the percentage of households headed by women, and the percentage of unattached individuals in the community are among the most powerful predictors of crime rates (Sampson 1987). Consistent with these findings, in most (but not all) studies that directly compare children living with both biological parents with children living in "broken" or reconstituted homes, the children from intact homes have lower rates of crime.

If the fact of a difference between single- and two-parent families is reasonably well established, the mechanisms by which it is produced are not adequately understood. It was once common in the delinquency literature to distinguish between homes broken by divorce and those broken by death. This distinction recognized the difficulty of separating the effects of the people involved in divorce from the effects of divorce itself. Indeed, it is common to find that involuntarily broken homes are less conducive to delinquency than homes in which the parent was a party to the decision to separate.

With the continued popularity of marriage, a possible complication enters the picture. The missing biological parent (in the overwhelming majority of cases, the father) is often replaced at some point by a stepparent. Is the child better or worse off as a result of the presence of an "unrelated" adult in the house?

The model we are using suggests that, *all else being equal*, one parent is sufficient. We could substitute "mother" or "father" for "parents" without any obvious loss in child-rearing ability. Husbands and wives tend to be sufficiently alike on such things as values, attitudes, and skills that for many purposes they may be treated as a unit. For that matter, our scheme does not even require that the adult involved in training the child be his or her guardian, let alone a biological parent. Proper training can be accomplished outside the confines of the two-parent home.

But all else is rarely equal. The single parent (usually a woman) must devote a good deal to support and maintenance activities that are at least to some extent shared in the two-parent family. Further, she must often do so in the absence of

psychological or social support. As a result, she is less able to devote time to monitoring and punishment and is more likely to be involved in negative, abusive contacts with her children.

Remarriage is by no means a complete solution to these problems. As compared to natural parents, stepparents are likely to report that they have no "parental feelings" toward their stepchildren, and they are unusually likely to be involved in cases of child abuse (Burgess 1980). The other side of the coin is the affection of the child for the parent. Such affection is conducive to non-delinquency in its own right and clearly eases the task of child-rearing. Affection is, for obvious reasons, less likely to be felt toward the new parent in a reconstituted family than toward a biological parent in a continuously intact family.

The Mother Who Works Outside the Home

The increase in the number of women in the labor force has several implications for the crime rate. To the extent this increase contributes to the instability of marriage, it will have the consequences for crime just discussed. Traditionally, however, the major concern was that the mother working outside the home would be unable to supervise or effectively rear her children. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950) found that the children of women who work, especially the children of those who work "occasionally" or "sporadically," were more likely to be delinquent. They also showed that the effect on delinquency of the mother's working was *completely* accounted for by the quality of supervision provided by the mother. (Such complete explanations of one factor by another are extremely rare in social science.) When the mother was able to arrange supervision for the child, her employment had no effect on the likelihood of delinquency. In fact, in this particular study, the children of regularly employed women were least likely to be delinquent when supervision was taken into account. This does not mean, however, that the employment of the mother had no effect. It did have an effect, at least among those in relatively deprived circumstances: the children of employed women were more likely to be delinquent.

More commonly, research reports a small effect of mother's employment that it is unable to explain. The advantage of the nonemployed mother over the employed mother in child-rearing remains when supervision and other characteristics of the mother, the family, and the child are taken into account. One possible implication of this explanatory failure is that the effects of employment influence children in ways not measurable except through their delinquency. One way of addressing this question would be to examine the effect of mother's employment on measures of inadequate self-control other than the commission of criminal acts—such as on accidents or school failure. If we are dealing with a social-control effect rather than a socialization effect, it should be possible to find a subset of deviant behaviors that are more affected than others by mother's employment. Although our scheme does not allow us *a priori* to separate the enduring effects of child "rearing" from the temporary effects of child "control," it alerts us to the fact that self-control and supervision can be the result of a single parental act.

Another consequence of female labor-force participation is that it leaves the house unguarded for large portions of the day. The unoccupied house is less attractive to adolescent members of the family and more attractive to other adolescents interested only in its contents. As we indicated earlier, research shows that the absence of guardians in the home is a good predictor of residential burglary.

Child Rearing and Self-Control: The School

Most people are sufficiently socialized by familial institutions to avoid involvement in criminal acts. Those not socialized sufficiently by the family may eventually learn self-control through the operation of other sanctioning systems or institutions. The institution given principal responsibility for this task in modern society is the school. As compared to the family, the school has several advantages as a socializing institution. First, it can more effectively monitor behavior than the family, with one teacher overseeing many children at a time. Second, as compared to most parents,

teachers generally have no difficulty recognizing deviant or disruptive behavior. Third, as compared to the family, the school has such a clear interest in maintaining order and discipline that it can be expected to do what it can to control disruptive behavior. Finally, like the family, the school in theory has the authority and the means to punish lapses in self-control.

All else being equal, it would appear that the school could be an effective socializing agency. The evidence suggests, however, that in contemporary American society the school has a difficult time teaching self-control. A major reason for this limited success of the modern school appears to stem from the lack of cooperation and support it receives from families that have already failed in the socialization task. When the family does not see to it that the child is in school doing what he or she should be doing, the child's problems in school are often directly traceable to the parents. For example, according to Robins (1966), truancy begins in the first and second grades (and is not, as some assume, solely an adolescent problem). Truancy or absence in the first and second grades can hardly be attributed to the child alone. Whatever the source of such truancy, it is highly predictive of low self-control later in life.

The question, then, is whether inadequate socialization by the family could be corrected by the school if it were given the chance—that is, if the family were cooperative. Robins, whose analyses of the stability of the antisocial personality are not ordinarily optimistic, notes that the school could be used to locate preadolescents with low self-control and that it might be effective in doing what the family has failed to do: "Since truancy and poor school performance are nearly universally present in pre-sociopaths, it should be possible to identify children requiring treatment through their school records. . . . [T]he fact that a gross lack of discipline in the home predicted long-term difficulties suggests trying a program in which the schools attempt to substitute for the missing parental discipline in acting to prevent truancy and school failures" (1966: 306–7).³

Even without parental support, in our view, the net effect of the school must be positive. As a result of the school experience, some students

learn better to appreciate the advantages and opportunities associated with self-control and are thus effectively socialized regardless of their familial experiences. One of the major school correlates of crime has always been the mundane homework. Those who do it are by definition thinking about tomorrow. Those who do not do it have a shorter time frame. One mark of socialization is considering the consequences of today's activities for tomorrow. Homework thus indexes and perhaps contributes to socialization.

Another major predictor of crime is not liking school. This connection is so strong that the statement "delinquents do not like school" does not require much in the way of qualification (Glueck and Glueck 1950: 144). The connection speaks well for the school as a socializing institution. Socializing institutions impose restraints; they do not allow unfettered pursuit of self-interest; they require accomplishment. Lack of self-control activates external controls, controls that are not applied to or felt by everyone, thus resulting in differences in attitude toward the school.

School performance also strongly predicts involvement in delinquent and criminal activities. Those who do well in school are unlikely to get into trouble with the law. This, too, supports the view of the school as a potentially successful training ground for the development of self-control. Students who like school and do well in it are likely to perceive a successful future and are thus susceptible to school sanctions (Stinchcombe 1964).

The crime and low self-control perspective organizes and explains most facts about the relation between schooling and crime, one of the staples of delinquency research. . . . For now, suffice it to say that self-control differences seem primarily attributable to family socialization practices. It is difficult for subsequent institutions to make up for deficiencies, but socialization is a task that, once successfully accomplished, appears to be largely irreversible.

The Stability Problem

Competent research regularly shows that the best predictor of crime is prior criminal behavior. In other words, research shows that differences

between people in the likelihood that they will commit criminal acts persist over time.⁴ This fact is central to our conception of criminality. In the next chapter we show how it calls into question the many theories of crime that depend on social institutions to create criminals from previously law-abiding citizens. For now, we briefly reconcile the fact of stability with the idea that desocialization is rare.

Combining little or no movement from high self-control to low self-control with the fact that socialization continues to occur throughout life produces the conclusion that the proportion of the population in the potential offender pool should tend to decline as cohorts age. This conclusion is consistent with research. Even the most active offenders burn out with time, and the documented number of “late-comers” to crime, or “good boys gone bad,” is sufficiently small to suggest that they may be accounted for in large part by misidentification or measurement error. (This result is also consistent with Bentham’s theory in that all sanction systems work against the possibility of lengthy careers in crime.) Put another way, the low self-control group continues over time to exhibit low self-control. Its size, however, declines.

Such stability of criminality is a staple of pragmatic criminology. The criminal justice system uses this fact in much the same way that educational institutions use prior academic performance to sort students and select personnel—that is, without much concern for the meaning of the variable. (A variant of the pragmatic response seeks to identify career criminals or high-rate offenders and thereby refine selection decisions, but here too nothing is usually said about what it is that produces long-standing differences in the level of involvement in crime [Blumstein et al. 1986].)

The traditional theoretical response denies stability and constructs theories that do not deal with “individual-level” variables. These theories automatically suggest that the causes of the “onset” of crime are not the same as the causes of “persistence” in crime. They also suggest that “desistance” from crime has unique causes. On analysis, however, most criminological theories appear to deal with onset and remain agnostic or silent on the persistence and desistance issues.

Thus no currently popular criminological theory attends to the stability of differences in offending over the life course. We are left with a paradoxical situation: a major finding of criminological research is routinely ignored or denied by criminological theory. After a century of research, crime theories remain inattentive to the fact that people differ in the likelihood that they will commit crimes and that these differences appear early and remain stable over much of the life course. Perhaps a major reason for ignoring the stability of low self-control is the assumption that other individual traits are stable and thereby account for apparently stable differences in criminal behavior. These are the so-called personality explanations of crime.

Personality and Criminality

Sociological criminology takes the position that no trait of personality has been shown to characterize criminals more than noncriminals (Sutherland and Cressey 1978: ch. 8). Psychological criminology takes the position that many personality traits have been shown to characterize criminals more than noncriminals (Wilson and Herrnstein 1985: ch. 7). We take the position that both views are wrong. The level of self-control, or criminality, distinguishes offenders from nonoffenders, and the degree of its presence or absence can be established before (and after) criminal acts have been committed. This enduring tendency is well within the meaning of “personality trait” and is thus contrary to the sociological view. Contrary to the psychological view, the evidence for personality differences between offenders and nonoffenders beyond self-control is, at best, unimpressive. Most of this evidence is produced by attaching personality labels to differences in rates of offending between offenders and nonoffenders—that is, by turning one difference into many.

For example, Wilson and Herrnstein (1985: ch. 7) report that delinquents score higher than nondelinquents on the following dimensions of personality (see also Herrnstein 1983):

1. “Q” scores on the Porteus Maze Tests.
2. Assertiveness.
3. Fearlessness.

4. Aggressiveness.
5. Unconventionality.
6. Extroversion.
7. Poor socialization.
8. Psychopathy.
9. Schizophrenia.
10. Hypomania.
11. Hyperactivity.
12. Poor conditionability.
13. Impulsiveness.
14. Lefthandedness.

All of these "personality" traits can be explained without abandoning the conclusion that offenders differ from nonoffenders only in their tendency to offend. One problem that has historically plagued personality research is the failure of its practitioners to report the content of their measuring instruments. This failure may be justified by the fact that the tests have commercial value, but the scientific result is the reporting of what are rightly considered "empirical tautologies," the discovery that two measures of the same thing are correlated with each other. In the present case, it seems fair to say that no one has found an independently measured personality trait substantially correlated with criminality. For example, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory has three subscales said to distinguish between delinquents and nondelinquents. The major discriminator is the Psychopathic Deviate subscale. As Wilson and Herrnstein note, this subscale includes "questions about a respondent's past criminal behavior" (1985: 187). But if this is so, then scale scores obviously cannot be used to establish the existence of a trait of personality independent of the tendency to commit criminal acts.

The situation is the same with the socialization subscale of the California Personality Inventory. This subscale contains items indistinguishable from standard self-report delinquency items. That it is correlated with other measures of delinquency supports the unremarkable conclusion that measures of delinquency tend to correlate with one another. By the same token, a high score on the Q scale of the Porteus Maze Tests indicates subjects who frequently "break the rules by lifting his or her pencil from the paper, by cutting

corners, or by allowing the pencil to drift out of the maze channels" (Wilson and Herrnstein 1985: 174). This measure is reminiscent of the measure of cheating developed by Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May (1928). That people who lie, cheat, and steal are more likely to cheat is not particularly instructive.

Earlier we examined the misleading suggestion that offenders can be usefully characterized as highly aggressive. Because measures of aggressiveness include many criminal acts, it is impossible to distinguish aggressiveness from criminality. . . . And so on through the list above. The measures of personality are either direct indicators of crime or conceptually indistinguishable from low self-control. Some, of course, are simply not supported by credible research (such as lefthandedness), and their continual reappearance should by now begin to undermine the credibility of psychological positivism.

The limited life of personality-based theories of crime is illustrated by the work of Hans Eysenck. He concluded that "persons with strong antisocial inclinations [should] have high P, high E, and high N scores," where P is psychoticism, E is extraversion, and N is neuroticism (1964: 58). Eysenck provided detailed descriptions of persons scoring high on extraversion and psychoticism. For example, the extravert is "sociable, likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to, and does not like reading and studying by himself. . . . He prefers to keep moving and doing things, tends to be aggressive and loses his temper quickly; his feelings are not kept under tight control and he is not always a reliable person" (pp. 50-51). In contrast, the person scoring high on the P factor is "(1) solitary, not caring for other people; (2) troublesome, not fitting in; (3) cruel, inhumane; (4) lack of feeling, insensitive; (5) lacking in empathy; (6) sensation-seeking, avid for strong sensory stimuli; (7) hostile to others, aggressive; (8) [has a] liking for odd and unusual things; (9) disregard for dangers, foolhardy; (10) likes to make fools of other people and to upset them" (p. 58).

Although Eysenck is satisfied that research supports the existence of these dimensions and the tendency of offenders to score high on them (Eysenck 1989), many scholars (e.g., Rutter and

Giller 1984) have not been convinced of the utility of Eysenck's personality scheme. (Wilson and Herrnstein do not include Eysenck's dimensions among the many personality traits they list.) In the current context, this scheme epitomizes the difficulties of the personality perspective (whatever the assumed source of personality differences) when applied to criminal behavior. In Eysenck's case, these difficulties are manifest in the obvious conceptual overlap of the personality dimensions and in the inability to measure them independently of the acts they are meant to produce.

The search for personality characteristics common to offenders has thus produced nothing contrary to the use of low self-control as the primary individual characteristic causing criminal behavior. People who develop strong self-control are unlikely to commit criminal acts throughout their lives, regardless of their other personality characteristics. In this sense, self-control is the only enduring personal characteristic predictive of criminal (and related) behavior. People who do not develop strong self-control are more likely to commit criminal acts, whatever the other dimensions of their personality. As people with low self-control age, they tend less and less to commit crimes; this decline is probably not entirely due to increasing self-control, but to age as well. . . .

Although the facts about individual differences in crime are consistent with our theory, they are also consistent with theories designed explicitly to account for them. Differences between these theories and our own should therefore be specifically discussed.

Alternative Theories of Criminality

It is common to say that there are multitudes of theories of criminality. In fact, however, the number of truly distinct explanations is small. One reason the number is limited is that the assumptions underlying theories are themselves limited and tend to cluster logically. Some theories assume that humans are naturally inclined to law-abiding or social behavior; others assume that humans are naturally inclined to criminal or antisocial behavior; still others try to make neither of these assumptions. Some assume that the

motivation to commit crime is different from the motivation for lawful activities; others make no such assumption. Some assume that human behavior is governed by forces in the immediate situation or environment; others assume that stable personality characteristics govern conduct. Some assume that each item of behavior has unique determinants; others assume that many items of behavior may have causes in common. In subsequent chapters, our theory will be frequently distinguished from other theories by the position it produces on various empirical and policy issues. Here we want to locate the theory along methodological dimensions as a means of exposing in some systematic way opportunities for further development.

One way to look at theories of crime is in terms of their assumptions about human nature and society. Another is to examine their intended scope, the range of deviant acts they encompass. Still another is to contrast the empirical tests that may be derived from them. Finally, one may ask where the theories are located in the temporal sequence leading to a particular criminal act. Taking the last first, it is relatively easy to describe current theories in terms of the proximity of their causal forces to the actual behavior they attempt to explain.

The Temporal Position of Criminality vis-à-vis Crime

Some theories (e.g., Becker 1974; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985; Cornish and Clark 1986) focus on decisionmaking in the immediate situation in which the offense is or is not committed. At an intermediate remove, other theories (e.g., Merton 1938; Cloward and Ohlin 1960) focus on the forces in adolescence that produce offenders—that is, people embarked on a course of life that ultimately leads to the commission of criminal acts. Still other theories (e.g., Mednick 1977; Colvin and Pauly 1983) focus on hereditary or class factors present at or before birth, factors that operate at great distance from the events they cause.

Traditionally, the more distant the causes from the criminal act, the harder it is to construct a plausible theory using them. As a result, "distant"

theories tend to exaggerate differences between offenders and nonoffenders, or to suggest causes that eventually *require* criminal acts. The model for such explanations is Lombroso's born criminal, a person destined to commit criminal acts from the point of conception. Only slightly less deterministic is the predispositional theory of the biologist or psychologist. These theories, too, suggest that once people have developed their respective dispositions the criminal behavior of some of them is a foregone conclusion.

Even temporally intermediate theories tend to divide the population into sharply distinct categories and to suggest that those in the potential offender category must go on to commit their quota of criminal acts. For example, once the lower-class boy has adapted to strain by giving up allegiance to the legitimate means to wealth, criminal acts ineluctably follow; once the person has learned an excess of definitions favorable to the violation of law, the outcome in criminal behavior is fixed. (The labeling theory saves itself from this problem by retaining the proviso that labels do not always "stick." Fair enough. But if they do stick, delinquency is inevitable.)

Theories that focus on the immediate decisionmaking situation are accordingly least concerned about differences between offenders and nonoffenders. In fact, since they do not require differential tendencies to commit crime, these theories are inclined to suggest that such differences are trivial or nonexistent. Theories that combine distant *and* proximate causes, such as our own, thus combine opposing tendencies, and risk inconsistency.

In principle, distant and proximate theories should be consistent. On inspection, however, they are usually inconsistent. The marked differences that in distant theories require crime do not permit unrestricted decisionmaking from moment to moment depending on the situation. For example, Wilson and Herrnstein advance a theory in which the offender chooses between crime and noncrime on the basis of the costs and benefits accruing to both lines of action:

The larger the ratio of the rewards (material and non-material) of noncrime to the rewards (material and nonmaterial) of crime, the weaker the tendency to

commit crimes. The bite of conscience, the approval of peers, and any sense of inequity will increase or decrease the total value of crime; the opinions of family, friends, and employers are important benefits of non-crime, as is the desire to avoid the penalties that can be imposed by the criminal justice system. The strength of any reward declines with time, but people differ in the rate at which they discount the future. The strength of a given reward is also affected by the total supply of reinforcers. [1985: 61]

The criminal described by Wilson and Herrnstein is a person without a conscience who cares about the approval of his friends and has a strong sense that he has not been treated fairly. Those knowledgeable about basic criminological theories will see the resemblance between these characteristics of the offender and those described by control theory, cultural deviance theory, and strain theory—in that order—and will be troubled by the contradictory images these theories have always projected (Kornhauser 1978). For present purposes, the problem is that cultural deviance theory and strain theory do not take approval of one's friends or a sense of inequity as momentary decisionmaking criteria. On the contrary, these theories suggest that such considerations override concerns for legitimate employment, the opinion of family and friends, and the desire to avoid the penalties of the criminal law. If so, the decision to commit a criminal act is no decision at all.

Wilson and Herrnstein argue that delinquents discount future consequences more than nondelinquents do. This is inconsistent with strain theory. In the Merton and the Cloward and Ohlin versions of this theory, the potential delinquent looks into the future and sees dismal prospects. As a consequence, he turns to a life of crime designed to brighten these prospects. In other words, in strain theory the delinquent is especially future-oriented as compared to the nondelinquent. (We believe Wilson and Herrnstein may be correct about the decisionmaking [crime] portion of their theory. The point is that the crime portion of their theory cannot be squared with its criminal portion.) The idea that offenders are likely to be concerned with equity is also contrary to the notion that they more heavily discount time: equity concerns, as described by Wilson and Herrnstein, require that the

person compare his effort/reward ratio with the effort/reward ratios of others. Such calculations obviously require rather broad perspectives on the social order, but for present purposes the important point is that people who feel inequitably treated must have put forth the effort that justifies their feelings (otherwise we would be talking about envy). But people who discount the future do not exert themselves for uncertain future benefits, and the notion of inequity at the point of crime is therefore incompatible with the image of the offender at the point of criminality.

The problems encountered by Wilson and Herrnstein are endemic to social learning theories, theories that also attempt to consider crime and criminality simultaneously. Social learning theories suggest that people learn to commit criminal acts because they provide benefits from valued groups in excess of their costs from neutral or disvalued groups (and apart from any benefits obtained from the criminal act itself). To the extent this is so, the idea that criminals differ from non-criminals in such things as time-discounting, aggressiveness, or impulsiveness is hard to sustain. On the contrary, such theories suggest that if there are differences between criminals and noncriminals, they are opposite to those usually suggested by theories of criminality. Such inconsistencies between the demands of theories of choice and theories of criminality are hard to ignore. Since data bearing on both theories are abundantly available, they are even harder to ignore. In our view, they survive only because of the disciplinary interests they appear to serve.

Our theory was in part devised by working back and forth between an image of crime and an image of criminality. Because crimes tend to combine immediate benefit and long-term cost, we are careful to avoid the image of an offender pursuing distant goals. Because crimes tend to be quick and easy to accomplish, we are careful to avoid the image of an offender driven by deep resentment or long-term social purposes. Because crimes tend to involve as victim and offender people with similar characteristics, we are careful to avoid the image of an offender striking *out* against class or race enemies.

Because lack of self-control is not conducive to hard work, delayed gratification, or persistence

in a course of action, we are careful to avoid an image of crime as a long-term, difficult, or drawn-out endeavor. Because lack of self-control is conducive to unpredictability or unreliability in behavior, we are careful to avoid an image of crime as an organized activity. And, because lack of self-control shows itself in many noncriminal as well as in criminal acts, we are careful to avoid an image of deviance as exclusively illegal behavior.

Our theory applies across the life course, and it applies from the point of decisionmaking back to the origins of differences in degree of self-control. In infancy and preadolescence it is a theory of socialization and social control, accounting for a variety of deviant acts—defiance, truancy, school failure—and constructing people unlikely in future years to commit criminal acts. In adolescence and the early adult years, the socialization component declines and the theory focuses largely on social control, accounting for an even greater variety of deviant and criminal acts: truancy, dropout, drug use, theft, assault, accidents, pregnancy. As adulthood approaches, natural (i.e., biological and physical) controls play an increasingly larger part, and there is a tendency for the rate of deviant behavior to decline. As a result of declining rates, the diversity of offenses committed by individual offenders tends to decline, but differences established earlier continue to explain the whole set of offenses, along with other manifestations of low social control.

The Scope of Theory

In principle, theorists must choose between broad theories roughly applicable to a wide variety of vaguely defined conduct and narrow theories directly applicable to specific, precisely defined acts. This choice is often seen as being broad, important, and wrong versus being narrow, trivial, and correct. Positivists have historically chosen the latter position. Unfortunately, the positivist assumption that the correctness of their theories compensates for their limitations is called into question by the frequency with which positivistic research disputes the correctness of positivistic explanations.

Theories that focus on decisionmaking have traditionally sought to explain all behavior with a

single principle. This principle tends to be complicated beyond recognition the moment it confronts individual differences that transcend properties of the immediate environment.

Previous efforts at compromise have not been particularly successful. Wilson and Herrnstein take the novel approach of using their general theory to explain a *narrowly* described set of acts:

The word "crime" can be applied to such varied behavior that it is not clear that it is a meaningful category of analysis. Stealing a comic book, punching a friend, cheating on a tax return, murdering a wife, robbing a bank, bribing a politician, hijacking an airplane—these and countless other acts are all crimes. Crime is as broad a category as disease, and perhaps as useless. [1985: 21]

These considerations lead Wilson and Herrnstein to concentrate on those persons who "commit serious crimes at a high rate." By doing so, they argue, they "escape the problem of comparing persons who park by a fire hydrant to persons who rob banks" (1985: 21). By "serious crimes," Wilson and Herrnstein mean "predatory street crimes," those acts "regarded as wrong by every society, preliterate as well as literate; . . . among these 'universal crimes' are murder, theft, robbery, and incest" (*ibid.*, p. 22).

One question that arises is why Wilson and Herrnstein would wish to restrict the range of their dependent variable without clear evidence that such restriction is necessary. What evidence do they use to justify dividing the domain of crime into serious street crime and other crime? For one thing, they are skeptical of the view that a general theory can explain crime across cultures or that it can explain all of the myriad crimes within a given culture. Clearly, the *a priori* conclusion that a theory should set its boundaries narrowly need not be taken to mean that the boundaries have been accurately described. The boundaries of a theory require theoretical justification. In its absence, concern for boundaries rightly suggests the operation of nontheoretical criteria.

The seriousness of crime is, in our view, a nontheoretical criterion. It is of course no accident that theorists prefer to limit their interests to "serious" matters—in the mistaken belief that the

importance of the phenomenon has something to say about the importance of the theory. The fact of the matter is that the importance or seriousness of a phenomenon is often hard to assess anyway. Individually, serious crimes may tend to produce more injury or loss, but collectively they may produce much less injury or loss than less serious crimes. By the same token, hard drugs such as heroin may produce less harm in the aggregate than drugs such as tobacco or alcohol. Arguably, reducing the rate of cigarette smoking would be a greater contribution to the resolution of a serious problem than would reducing the rate of drug addiction.

In any event, we do not share Wilson and Herrnstein's skepticism about the possibility of a general theory of crime, and we note that limits on the range of a theory should not be taken too seriously unless those stating the limits provide evidence that it will not work outside the narrow domain they specify. (Put another way, modesty per se is not a virtue of a theory.)

Tests of generality or scope are, in our view, easy to devise. In criminology it is often argued that special theories are required to explain female and male crime, crime in one culture rather than another, crime committed in the course of an occupation as distinct from street crime, or crime committed by children as distinct from crime committed by adults. . . . We intend our theory to apply to all of these cases, and more. It is meant to explain all crime, at all times, and, for that matter, many forms of behavior that are not sanctioned by the state.

Human Nature and Society

Useful theories of crime make assumptions about human nature. The range of possible assumptions is limited. A theory can assume, as ours does, that people naturally pursue their own interests and unless socialized to the contrary will use whatever means are available to them for such purposes. In this view, people are neither naturally "good" nor naturally "evil." They are, however, expected to behave in predictable ways. The standard social-contract assumption thus has useful properties, properties described throughout this book.

In contrast, a theory can assume, as nearly all sociological theories do, that people naturally tend to pursue group interests and will continue to do so unless forced to do otherwise—that is, that people are naturally good or social. Such theories also have useful properties. They make possible specific predictions about the causes or correlates of crime, predictions that tend to conflict with the predictions derived from theories that do not share their assumptions about human nature. Throughout the book we take advantage of this fact by comparing the adequacy of the hypotheses derived from these distinct perspectives.

Some theorists argue either explicitly (Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985) or implicitly (Wilson and Herrnstein 1985) that these various perspectives can be usefully combined without fear of contradiction or ambiguity. In fact, however, as is easily shown, theorists arguing for “integration” of these divergent views usually simply adopt one set of assumptions at the expense of the other or refuse to make assumptions and thus weaken what claims to theory they may have had. In the first case, most sociological integrationists simply adopt “social behavior” assumptions about crime and reject “individual interest” assumptions on the grounds that the assumptions favored by their discipline are correct (Johnson 1979; Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985; see also Hirschi 1979). In the second case, some psychologists think the assumption issue can be finessed by adopting an assumption-free psychological learning theory. Unfortunately, the idea that all views (strain, cultural deviance, social control, and rational choice) can be subsumed under a single learning theory abrogates the responsibility of the theorist to theorize about the sources of crime. For example, Wilson and Herrnstein advance the proposition that, in a situation of choice, people select the outcome they prefer (1985: 43). It is possible to make a theory from this statement by introducing bias into preference, by asserting or believing that some tendency acts on choice in the first instance; for example, one could say that, other things being equal, people will prefer outcomes that reduce their wealth and happiness (hard to believe, but at least testable). In the absence of such a bias, all preferences are possible and the theory asserts nothing. Evidence that it as-

serts nothing comes from the fact that it is said to *subsume* strain, cultural deviance, and social control theories, theories often used to illustrate conflicting assumptions and predictions. (In Chapter 4, [not reprinted here] we demonstrated the incompatibility of the strain and cultural deviance components in the Wilson-Herrnstein theory; see also Kornhauser 1978.)

Empirical Tests of the Crime and Criminality Perspective

Our stability postulate asserts that people with high self-control are less likely under all circumstances throughout life to commit crime. Our stability notion denies the ability of institutions to undo previously successful efforts at socialization, an ability other theories take as central to their position.

Similarly, our versatility construct suggests that one avenue available for the identification of persons with low self-control is via its noncriminal outlets. Other theories predict no correlation or even negative correlation between the various forms of deviance. Our conception of versatility also predicts that one can study crime by studying other noncriminal manifestations of low self-control without being misled by the results.

Our idea of crime asserts that complex, difficult crimes are so rare that they are an inadequate basis for theory and policy. Other perspectives suggest that exotic crimes are as theoretically useful as mundane crimes and just as likely to occur. Our idea of crime predicts that the vast majority of crimes will be characterized by simplicity, proximity of offender and target, and failure to gain the desired objective. Other theories make no room for failure, assuming that crime satisfies strong forces and desires and thus reinforces itself. Our perspective asserts that crime can be predicted from evidence of low self-control at any earlier stage of life. No sociological or economic theory allows such predictions. Our perspective also asserts that low self-control can be predicted from crime at any earlier stage of life; most sociological theories do not allow such a prediction.

Our perspective asserts that many of the traditional causes of crime are in fact consequences of

low self-control—that is, people with low self-control sort themselves and are sorted into a variety of circumstances that are *as a result* correlated with crime. Our theory predicts that prevention of one form of deviant behavior will not lead to compensating forms of behavior, but will reduce the total amount of deviant behavior engaged in by the population in question. Other theories predict displacement and suggest constant levels of deviance in a constantly “predisposed” population. We address these and other differences between our theory and rival perspectives in the pages that follow.

Conclusions

Theories that cannot incorporate or account for the stability of differences in offending over time are seriously at variance with good evidence. Theories that assume specialization in particular forms of crime or deviant behavior are seriously at odds with good evidence. Theories that propose to examine the parameters of criminal careers (such as onset, persistence, and desistance) or the characteristics of career criminals are at odds with the nature of crime. Theories that assume that criminal acts are means to long-term or altruistic goals are at odds with the facts.

Our theory explicitly addresses the stability and versatility findings. It accounts for them with the concept of self-control: with deferred gratification at one extreme and immediate gratification at the other, with caution at one extreme and risk-taking at the other. The mechanism producing these differences has been described as differences in child-rearing practices, with close attention to the behavior of the child at one extreme and neglect of the behavior of the child at the other.

The theory incorporates individual properties insofar as they have an impact on crime or on self-control. These properties are elucidated in subsequent chapters, where we apply our model to the facts about crime and deviant behavior. For now, we note that the theory is a direct response to analysis of the concept of crime and to our analysis of the failings of the theories of the positivistic disciplines. It incorporates a classical view of the role of choice and a positivistic view of the role of causation in the explanation of behavior.

It produces a general explanatory concept that can be measured independently of the phenomenon it is alleged to cause, and it is thus directly testable.

Notes

1. We do not mean to imply that stable individual differences between offenders and nonoffenders are nonexistent. The fact of the matter is, however, that substantial evidence documenting individual differences is not as clear to us as it appears to be to others. The evidence on intelligence is an exception. Here differences favoring nonoffenders have been abundantly documented (cf. Wilson and Herrnstein 1985).

2. It is commonly observed (in an unsystematic way) that in an otherwise law-abiding family individual children are seriously delinquent. This observation is taken as evidence against family or child-rearing explanations of crime. (If the parents reared most of their children properly, how can their child-rearing practices be responsible for their delinquent children as well?) Such observations do not dispute the strong tendencies toward consistency within families mentioned in the text. They do suggest that family child-rearing practices are not the only causes of crime.

3. In subsequent chapters we emphasize the limited power of institutions to create self-control later in life when it has been therefore lacking. Our theory clearly argues, however, that it is easier to develop self-control among people lacking it than to undermine or destroy self-control among those possessing it. Consistent with this position, the data routinely show that preadolescents without behavior problems rarely end up with significant problems as adults (see, e.g., Robins 1966; Glueck and Glueck 1968).

4. We described the research documenting the stability of “aggression” in Chapter 3 [not reprinted here], and the research documenting the stability of “criminality” is discussed at length in Chapter 11 [not reprinted here] in reference to methodologies for studying crime and criminality.

References

- BECKER, GARY. 1974. “Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach.” In *Essays in the Economics of Crime and Punishment*, edited by G. Becker and W. Landes (pp. 1–54). New York: Columbia University Press.
- BENTHAM, JEREMY. 1970 [1789]. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. London: The Athlone Press.
- BLUMSTEIN, ALFRED, JACQUELINE COHEN, JEFFERY ROTH, and CHRISTY VISHER. 1986. *Criminal Careers*

- and "Career Criminals." Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- BURGESS, ROBERT L. 1980. "Family Violence: Implications from Evolutionary Biology." In *Understanding Crime*, edited by T. Hirschi and M. Gottfredson (pp. 91-101). Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- CLOWARD, RICHARD, and LLOYD OHLIN. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity*. New York: The Free Press.
- COLVIN, MARK, and JOHN PAULY. 1983. "A Critique of Criminology: Toward an Integrated Structural-Marxist Theory of Delinquency Production." *American Journal of Sociology*, 89: 513-51.
- CORNISH, DEREK B., and RONALD V. CLARKE. 1986. *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- CURRIE, ELLIOTT. 1985. *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- ELLIOTT, DELBERT, DAVID HUIZINGA, and SUZANNE AGETON. 1985. *Explaining Delinquency and Drug Use*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- EYSENCK, HANS. 1964. *Crime and Personality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1977. *Crime and Personality*. Rev. ed. London: Paladin.
- . 1989. "Personality and Criminality: A Dispositional Analysis." In *Advances in Criminological Theory*, edited by W. S. Laufer and F. Adler (pp. 89-110). New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- GLUECK, SHELDON, and ELEANOR GLUECK. 1950. *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . 1968. *Delinquents and Nondelinquents in Perspective*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- GOTTFREDSON, MICHAEL. 1984. *Victims of Crime: The Dimensions of Risk*. London: HMSO.
- GOUGH, HARRISON G. 1948. "A Sociological Theory of Psychopathy." *American Journal of Sociology*, 53: 359-66.
- HARTSHORNE, HUGH, and MARK MAY. 1928. *Studies in the Nature of Character*. New York: Macmillan.
- HERRNSTEIN, RICHARD. 1983. "Some Criminogenic Traits of Offenders." In *Crime and Public Policy*, edited by J. Q. Wilson (pp. 31-52). San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies.
- HINDELANG, MICHAEL J. 1971. "Age, Sex, and the Versatility of Delinquent Involvements." *Social Problems*, 18: 522-35.
- HINDELANG, MICHAEL, TRAVIS HIRSCHI, and JOSEPH WEIS. 1981. *Measuring Delinquency*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- HIRSCHI, TRAVIS. 1969. *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1979. "Separate and Unequal Is Better." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 16: 34-38.
- HIRSCHI, TRAVIS, and MICHAEL GOTTFREDSON. 1986. "The Distinction Between Crime and Criminality." In *Critique and Explanation: Essays in Honor of Gwynne Nettler*, edited by T. F. Hartnagel and R. Silverman (pp. 55-69). New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- JOHNSON, RICHARD E. 1979. *Juvenile Delinquency and Its Origins*. Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press.
- KLEIN, MALCOLM. 1984. "Offense Specialization and Versatility Among Juveniles." *British Journal of Criminology*, 24: 185-94.
- KORNHAUSER, RUTH. 1978. *Social Sources of Delinquency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LOEBER, ROLF, and MAGDA STOUTHAMER-LOEBER. 1986. "Family Factors as Correlates and Predictor of Juvenile Conduct Problems and Delinquency." In *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research* vol. 7, edited by M. Tonry and N. Morris (pp. 29-149). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MCCORD, JOAN. 1979. "Some Child-Rearing Antecedents of Criminal Behavior in Adult Men." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37: 1477-86.
- MCCORD, WILLIAM, and JOAN MCCORD. 1959. *Origin of Crime: A New Evaluation of the Cambridge Somerville Study*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- MEDNICK, SARNOFF. 1977. "A Bio-social Theory of the Learning of Law-Abiding Behavior." In *Biosocial Bases of Criminal Behavior*, edited by S. Mednick and K. O. Christiansen (pp. 1-8). New York: Gardner.
- MERTON, ROBERT. 1938. "Social Structure and 'Anomie.'" *American Sociological Review*, 3: 672-82.
- PAITERSON, GERALD R. 1980. "Children Who Steal." In *Understanding Crime*, edited by T. Hirschi and M. Gottfredson (pp. 73-90). Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- PETERSILIA, JOAN. 1980. "Criminal Career Research: A Review of Recent Evidence." In *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, vol. 2, edited by M. Tonry and N. Morris (pp. 321-79). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- RILEY, DAVID, and MARGARET SHAW. 1985. *Parent Supervision and Juvenile Delinquency*. Home Office Research Study no. 83. London: HMSO.
- ROBINS, LEE. 1966. *Deviant Children Grown Up*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.
- ROBINS, LEE. 1978. "Aetiological Implications in Studies of Childhood Histories Relating to Antisocial

- Personality." In *Psychopathic Behavior*, edited by R. Hare and D. Schalling (pp. 255-71). New York: Wiley.
- ROJEK, DEAN, and MAYNARD ERICKSON. 1982. "Delinquent Careers." *Criminology*, 20: 5-28.
- RUTTER, MICHAEL, and HENRI GILLER. 1984. *Juvenile Delinquency: Trends and Perspectives*. New York: Guilford.
- SAMPSON, ROBERT J. 1987. "Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption." *American Journal of Sociology*, 93: 348-82.
- STINCHCOMBE, ARTHUR. 1964. *Rebellion in a High School*. Chicago: Quadrangle.
- SUTHERLAND, EDWIN, and DONALD CRESSEY. 1977. *Principles of Criminology*. 10th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- WEST, DONALD, and DAVID FARRINGTON. 1973. *Who Becomes Delinquent?* London: Heinemann.
- . 1977. *The Delinquent Way of Life*. London: Heinemann.
- WILSON, JAMES Q., and RICHARD HERRNSTEIN. 1985. *Crime and Human Nature*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- WOLFGANG, MARVIN, ROBERT FIGLIO, and THORSTEN SELLIN. 1972. *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



On the Absence of Self-Control as the Basis for a General Theory of Crime A Critique*

GILBERT GEIS**

In the final sentence of *A General Theory of Crime*, Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi note that they 'will be happy if our theory helps renew some intellectual interest in criminology, a field that once engaged the finest minds in the community' (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 275). Putting aside the arguable proposition that minds currently grappling with the subject of crime are less keen than those that tackled the subject in earlier years, the present critique of Gottfredson and Hirschi's work, seen beneficently, seeks to contribute to the ultimate happiness of the progenitors of what in disciplinary

shorthand has come to be known as 'self-control theory.' Seen less benignly, this article raises a number of issues that, if I am correct, fatally undermine the logic and implications and, more specifically, the value of self-control theory.

For starters, we can juxtapose the dictum about theorizing by Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize physicist, to the position taken by Hirschi on the same issue. Feynman insists that full disclosure is a prerequisite for the responsible promulgation of a theory:

Details that could throw doubt upon your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it. If you make a theory . . . then you must put down all the facts that disagree with it.

(Feynman, 1985: 341)

Compare this with Hirschi's position on the same matter:

A major mistake in my original oppositional comparison of social control and social learning theory was to

*From Gilbert Geis, *Theoretical Criminology* 4:1, pp. 35-53, copyright © 2000. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

**I want to thank the following for their reviews of an earlier version of this article and to indicate that in no regard do they necessarily agree with the views I express: John Braithwaite, Frank Cullen, Gary Green, Ted Huston, Val Jenness, and Bob Meier. Richard Pery was instrumental in convincing me to turn a brief satire into a longer and more serious review of self-control theory.