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Social Control Theory

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The *social control* approach to understanding crime is one of the three major sociological perspectives in contemporary criminology. Control theorists believe that conformity to the rules of society is produced by socialization and maintained by ties to people and institutions—to family members, friends, schools, and jobs. Put briefly, crime and delinquency result when the individual's bond to society is weak or broken. As social bonds increase in strength, the costs of crime to the individual increase as well.

The intellectual roots of social control theory reach back several centuries, but it was not until the middle of the 20th century that this theory began to generate broad interest among crime researchers. Since then, it has been among the most frequently tested in the scientific literature and has garnered substantial empirical support. Its research and policy implications have generated perhaps the most debate of any modern theory of crime. The influence of social control theory on actual crime control policy has been less impressive. Social control theories do not support expansion of the criminal justice system. They do not favor larger police forces or lengthy incarceration as crime control policies. They favor instead policies designed to establish stronger bonds between individuals and society.

The first task of the control theorist is to identify the important elements of the bond to society. The second task is to say what is meant by *society*—to locate the persons and institutions important in the control of delinquent and criminal behavior. The following list of elements of the bond—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—has proved useful in explaining the logic of the theory and in summarizing relevant research. It has also provided guidelines for evaluation of delinquency prevention programs.

Attachment

Social control theory assumes that people can see the advantages of crime and are capable of inventing and executing all sorts of criminal acts on the spot—without special motivation or prior training. It assumes that the impulse to commit crime is resisted because of the costs associated with such behavior. It assumes further that a primary cost of crime is the disapproval of the people about whom the potential offender cares. To the extent that the potential offender cares about no one, he or she is free to commit the crime in question. Sociologists often explain conformity as the result of such sensitivity. Psychologists as often explain deviation as the result of insensitivity to the concerns of others. Together, they tell us that sensitivity is a continuum and that some people have more than others and some have less than others. This is the position adopted by control theorists. They focus on the extent to which people are sensitive to the opinion of others and predict that this variable will predict rates of crime and delinquency.

Sensitivity suggests feeling or emotion, and this element of the social bond indeed attempts to capture the emotions (or lack thereof) involved in conformity and deviance. The words are many: *affection, love, concern, care,* and *respect,*

to name only some. Social control theorists use *attachment* as an abstract summary of these concepts.

The evidence is clear that family attachments are strongly correlated with (non)delinquency. In their famous book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency,* Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950) indicated that, according to their research, affection of the father and the mother for the child were two of the best five predictors of delinquency. They found, too, that in the other direction, the emotional ties of the child to the parent tended to be weaker among delinquents. From this, we may conclude that family attachments play a role in the socialization of the child as well as in maintaining his or her subsequent conformity to the rules of society. Researchers have reported that family attachments may account for the apparent effects of other variables. For example, the item "Do your parents know where you are (and what you are doing) when you are away from home?" has been often found to predict levels of self-reported delinquency. These correlations are of course taken as evidence of the importance of parental supervision. They are better seen as evidence of the importance of communication between parent and child. Scandinavian scholars have shown that parents know where their children are to the extent that their children inform them of their whereabouts. In other words, well-supervised children are those who supervise themselves, those who in effect take their parents with them wherever they happen to go.

Attachment to school is also a well-established predictor of delinquency. Students who report liking school and caring about the opinion of teachers are far less likely to be delinquent regardless of how delinquency is measured. Indeed, it is practically a truism that "delinquents don't like school." The general principle would seem to be that withdrawal of favorable sentiments toward controlling institutions neutralizes their moral force. Rebels and revolutionaries may dispute this principle, but that says nothing about the element of truth it contains (and they prove it by their actions).

Commitment

Everyone seems to understand the paraphrased song lyric that freedom is another way of saying that one has nothing left to lose. Control theory captures this idea in the concept of *commitment,* the idea that conforming behavior protects and preserves capital, whereas crime and delinquency put it at risk. The potential delinquent calculates the costs and benefits of crime. The more he or she has to lose, the greater the potential costs of the crime and the less likely it is to be committed. What does one lose or risk losing from crime? The short answer is life, liberty, and property. The long answer, attachments aside, is that it depends on one's assets and prospects, on one's accomplishments and aspirations.

For young people in American society, the main arena for the display of accomplishment or achievement is the school. Athletics aside, and however diverse the curriculum, the currency of this realm is academic achievement. Also, truancy aside, of the available measures of school-related activities, grade point average appears to be the best predictor of delinquency. Good students are likely to aspire to further education and are unlikely to commit delinquent acts or to get into difficulties with the police. Grade point average accounts for the correlation between IQ test scores and delinquency. Put another way, IQ affects delinquency through its effect of grades. It has no direct effect on delinquency. This means that the ancient idea that, other things equal, intelligent people are better able to appreciate the consequences of their acts is not supported by the data; instead, the data suggest that the correspondence between achievement and prospects on one side and delinquency on the other is just what one would expect from rational actors, whatever their level of intelligence.

Involvement

In television courtrooms, one task of the prosecutor is to establish that the defendant had the opportunity to commit the crime of which he or she is accused. Crimes are events that take place at a given point in time. Conditions necessary for their accomplishment may or may not be present. Control theorists, like most other theorists, have seized on this fact and tried to incorporate the notion of opportunity into their explanation of crime. They do so through the concept of *involvement,* which is short for "involvement in conventional activities." The idea is that people doing conventional things—working, playing games, watching sporting events or television, doing homework, engaging in hobbies, or talking to parents—are to that extent unable to commit delinquent acts, whatever their delinquent tendencies may be.

Despite its firm place in the common sense of criminology, the idea of involvement/limited opportunity has not fared well when put to the test. More than one researcher has found that adolescents with jobs are *more* rather than less likely to be delinquent. Also, counts of the hours of the day the adolescent is doing an activity that is inconsistent with delinquent acts have proved disappointing.

There are two problems with the concept of involvement. First, it is based on a misconception of the nature of crime. Most criminal acts, perhaps especially those available to adolescents, require only seconds or minutes for their completion—the pull of the trigger, a swing of the fist, a barked command, a jimmied door, a grab from a rack or showcase. This fact allows the commission of large numbers of criminal acts by a single offender in a short period of time. (It also makes ridiculous attempts to estimate the average number of offenses committed by individual offenders in an extended period of time.) Because opportunities for crimes are ubiquitous, the hope of preventing them by otherwise occupying the potential offender has proved vain.

A second problem with this concept is that it neglects the fact that opportunities for crime reside to a large extent in the eye of the beholder. Objective conditions matter, but so do the perceptions of actors. Control theory claims that people differ in the strength of their bonds to society. It therefore predicts that people who are strongly bonded are less

likely to engage in activities that provide opportunities for delinquency and are less likely to see them should they arise.

Belief

The role of *beliefs* in the causation of delinquency is a matter of considerable dispute. Some social scientists argue that they are of central importance. Others ignore them, suggesting that they are nothing more than words that reflect (and justify) past behavior but are in no way responsible for it. Control theory rejects the view that beliefs are positive causes of delinquency, that offenders are somehow living up to their beliefs when they commit delinquent acts. Control theory is, however, compatible with the view that some beliefs prevent delinquency while others allow it.

Perhaps the principal benefit of the study of beliefs is that they help us understand how the other bonds work to prevent delinquency. For example, responses to the statement "People who break the law are almost always caught and punished" are related to delinquency in the expected direction. Individuals who disagree are more likely to report delinquent acts. What can be said about the factual accuracy of this belief? Do delinquents know the truth while nondelinquents have been systematically misinformed? The answer appears to be that both delinquents and nondelinquents are correct, at least from their point of view. In the short term, "getting away with it" may well be the rule. In the long term, offenders are typically caught and, in various ways, punished. A short-term orientation reflects a lack of commitment and is therefore conducive to delinquency. A long-term orientation is indicative of commitment and prevents delinquency. All of this teaches two lessons: (1) Manipulating beliefs without changing the reality on which they are based is unlikely to reduce the level of delinquency, and (2) changing actual levels of law enforcement efficiency is unlikely to change the beliefs that allow and disallow criminal conduct.

Historical Development

The intellectual underpinnings of social control theory may be seen in the 17th-century work of Thomas Hobbes. In his famous book *Leviathan* Hobbes described a set of basic assumptions about human nature and the origins of civil society. Hobbes believed that humans naturally seek personal advantage without regard for the rights or concerns of others. In the absence of external restraints, in a state of nature, crime is a rational choice, a "war of all against all" naturally follows, and the life of everyone is "nasty, poor, brutish, and short." Fortunately, in Hobbes's view, a second choice presents itself to individuals capable of calculating the costs and benefits of their actions. They can continue in a state of war, or they can establish a system of laws and a government empowered to punish those who resort to force and fraud in pursuit of their private interests. Given the choice between war and peace, rational people choose to submit to government authority in return for the safety of their persons and property.

Hobbes's theory of crime is a *choice* theory. People consider the costs and benefits of crime and act accordingly. The important costs of crime are those exacted by the state—which has the power to deprive citizens of life, liberty, and property. The content of the criminal law is not problematic. There is consensus that the use of force and fraud for private purposes is illegitimate. Crime is real. It is a not a matter of definition; it is not a social construction that may vary from time to time and place to place.

As we have seen, social control theory accepts *choice* and *consensus*. People are not forced by unusual needs or desires to commit criminal acts. Belief in the validity of the core of the criminal law is shared by everyone. Control theory nevertheless rejects Hobbes's view (which is still a popular view among economists and political scientists) that the important costs of crime are the penalties imposed by the state. It can reject this view because of the assumption (and fact) of consensus. Everyone agrees that theft, robbery, and murder are crimes. As a result, victims and witnesses report offenses to interested parties, and their perpetrators embarrass and shame those who know them. Shame and the penalties that follow from it are, according to social control theory, major costs of crime.

Hobbes's view of human nature does not imply that people are inherently criminal or that they prefer crime; it suggests only that self-interest underlies whatever they do. They harm others because it gives them pleasure or advantage. They steal because stealing provides goods or money. They hit or threaten to hit others because such acts may bring status, a feeling of justice, or control of their behavior. They do good things for self-interested reasons as well. They are trustworthy and helpful because being so brings such rewards as trust and gratitude. From the point of view of their motives, there is thus no difference between offenders and nonoffenders, between criminal and noncriminal acts; all reflect the same basic desires. Thus, working from the Hobbesian view of human nature, social control theories do not ask why people commit criminal acts. They ask instead why, given the plentiful opportunities for criminal acts and their obvious benefits, people do not commit more of them.

Sociology is the dominant discipline in the study of crime. Sociologists reject Hobbes's perspective. They see human behavior as caused rather than chosen. They tend to reject the idea of consensus, preferring the idea of cultural diversity or even culture conflict. Nevertheless, in the early years of the 20th century, sociologists in the United States often talked about *social disorganization,* the breakdown of society they saw occurring in immigrant communities and the slums of large cities. The high rates of crime and delinquency in these areas were seen as symptoms of this breakdown. In disorganized areas, unemployment is high and families, schools, and neighborhoods are too weak to control the behavior of their residents. The theory of crime implicit in the concept of social disorganization is a variety of social control theory. In the absence of the usual social restraints imposed by jobs, families, schools, churches, and

neighborhoods, delinquency flourishes. In other words, delinquency is natural, as Hobbes suggested and, worse—but contrary to Hobbes—the penalties of the criminal justice system are insufficient to contain it.

By the middle of the 20th century, the concept of social disorganization was no longer fashionable. Sociological theories had come to focus primarily on the impact of social class and culture on law-violating behavior. Lower-class adolescents were said to be forced into delinquency in their efforts to realize the American Dream or they were socialized into a lower-class culture that justifies or requires delinquent behavior. As an explanatory factor, the family had fallen from favor and the school was rarely mentioned except as an important source of strain and subsequent malicious delinquency among lower-class boys.

Sociology, however, is more than a theoretical perspective that is brought to bear in efforts to explain criminal and delinquent behavior. It is also a research discipline that attempts to locate the causes and correlates of such behavior. While sociological theories of delinquency were painting one picture of delinquency, research was painting a very different picture, and sociological researchers were forced to use or invent a sociologically incorrect language to describe it.

By the mid-20th century, hundreds of studies of delinquency had been published, and the number was growing at an ever-increasing rate. With respect to its findings, perhaps the most important was the work of a Harvard University couple, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck. Their book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950), discussed earlier in this chapter, is unrivaled in the scope and complexity of its results. The Gluecks compared 500 delinquent boys with 500 nondelinquent boys on a large number of carefully measured variables: family structure and relations, school attitudes and performance, physical and mental characteristics, and attitudes and behavior. The Gluecks reported that the five best predictors of delinquency were "family" variables: (1) discipline of the boy by his father, (2) supervision of the boy by his mother, (3) affection of the father (and [4], separately, the mother) for the boy, and (5) cohesiveness of the family.

The Gluecks's research was said to be atheoretical, and they did not advertise themselves as theorists, but there could be no doubt that their findings supported social control theory. There also could be no doubt that their characterization of their findings reflected acceptance of a control theory perspective—and rejection of then-popular sociological theories. (For example, whereas popular sociological theories assumed that delinquents tend to be eager to succeed in school, the Gluecks reported that truancy and "lack of interest in school work" were from an early age one of their defining characteristics.) In one fell swoop, then, the Gluecks put control theory back on the table.

The Gluecks were not alone; other researchers were reporting results consistent with control theory and using the language of the theory to interpret them. Albert Reiss resurrected the distinction found in the social disorganization literature between personal and social controls. Walter Reckless and colleagues advanced a *containment* theory of delinquency that was said to account for the behavior of "good" as well as "bad" boys. Jackson Toby introduced the idea of *stakes in conformity*—the costs of delinquency to people with good reputations and bright prospects—as an important factor in the control of delinquent behavior.

During the same mid-20th century period, social control theory benefited from introduction of an innovative technique of research, what came to be known as the *self-report method.* Prior to the invention of this method, researchers had been forced to rely on official measures of delinquency, basically police and court records. The new method allowed them to ask juveniles about their delinquent activities regardless of whether they had official records. It allowed researchers at the same time to ask young people about their relationships with parents, their attitudes toward school, and much else of interest to those wishing to explain delinquent behavior. Indeed, this research technique put the explanation of delinquency in a new light. For example, whereas the Gluecks stressed the affection of the parent for the child, it now became apparent—because it could be measured—that the affection of the child for the parent should be equally, if not more, important.

Relying on the terms and assumptions of the social disorganization perspective, F. Ivan Nye (1958) undertook the first major self-report study of delinquency, distinguishing between internal control and direct and indirect forms of social control. Nye's particular focus was on the family. He showed how parents limit access of their children to opportunities for delinquency (an example of a direct control) and how adolescents refrain from delinquency out of concern that their parents might disapprove of such actions (an indirect control). He illustrated internal control with the concept of *conscience,* which acts to prevent one from committing acts that are harmful to others.

The various strands of thought and research on social control were brought together in Travis Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency,* published in 1969. This book reports in a study of a large sample of junior and senior high school students using self-report and official measures of delinquency. The theory guiding the study, as well as some of the study's findings, are summarized at the beginning of this chapter. Hirschi's study was a small part of a larger study based on ideas compatible with alternative theories of delinquency. Hirschi was therefore able to compare and contrast the predictions of social control theory with those stemming from its major competitors. These comparisons and contrasts have proved useful in providing structure to subsequent research.

Similarities and Differences Between Social Control Theories and Other Major Theories of Crime

As we have seen, the underlying assumptions of social control theory are in many respects similar to those of classical theories of crime, theories that have come down to us under such names as *deterrence theory* and *rational choice*

theory. The differences among them are often differences in emphasis. Deterrence theory claims that the key to crime control is found in the swiftness, severity, and certainty of the punishments administered by the legal system. Rational choice theory focuses on the costs and benefits of crime. Control theorists accept the importance of punishment, but they ignore the punishments of the legal system and thereby question their role in the control of crime. They do the same with benefits of crime—that is, they ignore them on the grounds that the benefits of crime are the same as the benefits of noncrime.

The assumptions of control theories contrast sharply with those of other sociological explanations of crime. Cultural deviance or social learning theories assume that there is no natural capacity for crime. In their view, all human action, whether crime or conformity, is the product of a combination of socializing influences. Peers exert influence on the individual, as does the family and, more broadly, the prevailing culture. Where the sum total of influences directs the individual in particular instances to engage in crime, then that person will do so. Where these influences are absent, crime cannot occur. The offender is thus a conformist, albeit not to the rules of the dominant society.

Strain theories (sometimes called *anomie theories*) assume that an individual is naturally inclined to conform to standard cultural values but can be pushed into crime when the social structure fails to provide legitimate opportunities to succeed. These theorists emphasize the influence of the American Dream, which produces aspirations and desires that often (all too often, scholars say) cannot be satisfied within the limits of the law. These sociological perspectives have proved popular and adaptable. They continue to provide a foundation for critiques of social control theory.

A Critical Issue

One question that social control theory has faced from its inception relates to the role of delinquent peers. Walter Reckless (1961), a prominent theorist whose work is usually associated with control theory, concluded from the Gluecks's (1950) data that "companionship is unquestionably the most telling force in male delinquency and crime" (p. 10). If this conclusion were allowed to stand unquestioned, whatever debate there might be between social control theory and social learning theory would be settled in favor of the latter. From the beginning, control theorists have questioned the meaning of the admittedly strong correlation between one's own delinquency and the delinquency of one's friends. Their major counterhypothesis was that advanced by the Gluecks, who interpreted their own data as showing that birds of a feather flock together, so to speak. In control theory terms, this argument is that weak bonds to society lead to association with delinquents and to delinquent behavior. Companionship and delinquency thus have a common cause. The limits of this argument were readily apparent. The correlation between companionship and delinquency was so strong that no combination of its supposed causes could possibly account for it. Social learning theorists naturally saw this as evidence against social control theory and in favor of their own theory. A compromise solution was to integrate the two theories, the idea being that lack of social control frees the adolescent to be taught crime and delinquency by his or her peers.

Hirschi resisted this compromise, observing that the two theories, if combined, would contain fatal internal contradictions. Social control theories assume that crime is natural. Social learning theories assume crime must be learned. The two assumptions cannot peacefully coexist, because one assumption must necessarily negate the other. Yet the delinquent-peer effect would not go away. Its presence forced social control theorists to confront a fact seemingly in contradiction to the theory's internal logic. Attempts were then made to explain the role of delinquent peers without violating the assumptions of control theory. Perhaps peers do not teach delinquency, but they make it easier or less risky, thus increasing the temptation to crime by lowering its costs. Assaults and robberies and burglaries are, after all, facilitated by the support of others, just as they are facilitated by muscles and guns and agility.

Another tack was to question the validity of the measures of peer delinquency. If the data collection methods were faulty, then the seemingly strong evidence supporting the delinquent peers–delinquency correlation could also be faulty. Most studies of the delinquency of peers ask the respondents to describe their friends. The results, some researchers argued, could reflect the phenomenon of *projection,* whereby study respondents, apparently describing their friends, are in fact describing themselves. Dana Haynie and Wayne Osgood (2005) tested this hypothesis. They reported that standard data do contain a good quantity of projection. Using measures of delinquency collected directly from the peers in question, they found that what was once the strongest known predictor of crime turned out to have only a modest effect, an effect that could be accounted for by alternative theories of crime. This story teaches several lessons. Persistent attention to a theoretical problem may produce unexpected results. The facts that are at the root of the problem may themselves fail to survive, and the end results of criticisms of a criminological theory do not necessarily take the form imagined by its critics.

Theoretical and Research Extensions

In its social disorganization form, social control theory was what is now called a *life course theory.* The idea was straightforward: Individuals are controlled by ties to the significant people and institutions in their lives. As they move through the various stages of life, these people and institutions automatically change. Their significance and the strength of the individual's ties to them may change as well. The favorite example was the transition from the family of orientation, with parents and siblings, to the family of procreation, with a spouse and children. In principle, the transition from one family to the other could be a period of deregulation, of

relative freedom from social bonds and a consequent high rate of delinquency. In principle, successful completion of this transition was problematic. The adolescent could end up securely wrapped in the arms of job, church, community, and family, or he or she could end up in a stage of protracted adolescence, with weak and fleeting ties to the central institutions of adulthood. Adolescent delinquents could easily end up as law-abiding adults, and adolescent conformists could easily end up as late-starting adult offenders.

The social control theory described was based on data collected at one point in time. It could not therefore deal directly with questions of change and transition. It was designed, however, with the change and transition problem firmly in mind. If the connection between juvenile delinquency and adult crime depended on events that could not be foreseen, this posed no problem for the theory. It assumed that strong bonds could weaken, or break, that the people and institutions to which one was tied could change their character or cease to exist. It assumed, too, that weak bonds could strengthen, that they could be established where none previously existed. Social control theory was thus seen as the only major theory capable of dealing with variation in levels of crime and delinquency over the life course.

Readily available data suggested, however, that the facts were not so complicated. The data suggested that differences in levels of delinquency were relatively constant across individuals, that the form of the age distribution of crime was the same from one group to another. As a result, in 1983, Hirschi and his colleague Michael Gottfredson explicitly rejected the life course perspective on crime, declaring that criminality, once established in late childhood, stabilized and did not change. Put another way, they said that if a researcher ranks children on their propensity to commit criminal acts at age 8, he or she will find the same rank order when the children are 15 and any age thereafter. They concluded that no criminological theory, including social control theory, could explain the relation between age and crime.

Shortly thereafter, Robert Sampson and John Laub came into possession of the data originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Gluecks in the famous study described earlier. After reworking and supplementing these data, they were able to follow the Gluecks's (1950) participants into adulthood and, by so doing, restate and test the life course (or longitudinal) version of social control theory, which they called a *theory of informal social control.* Analyses reported in their book *Crime in the Making* (1993) confirm the Gluecks's findings about the correlates of delinquency and move on to a focus on stability and change in levels of delinquency during adulthood. Their analyses (and subsequent analyses based on even more extensive data) confirm the importance for delinquency involvement of such adult social bonds as income, marriage, attachment to spouse, job stability, and commitment. It should be mentioned that their analyses of full-life histories reveal a substantial decline in crime with age that their bond measures cannot explain.

Policy Implications

Current crime control policy in the United States emphasizes the value of incarceration on the one side and treatment or rehabilitation on the other. Increased rates of incarceration have been encouraged by renewed academic interest in so-called "career criminals" and by the view that crime control requires swift, certain, and severe punishment by agents of the criminal justice system. The emphasis on punishment is encouraged by politicians, the media, an influential segment of academic criminology, and of course by law enforcement officials themselves. The crime problem is a blessing to all of them, and they do not fail to take advantage of it.

Increased levels of concern and punishment automatically produce greater numbers of potential offenders, probationers, inmates, and parolees—all of whom are thought to benefit from exposure to modern treatment and rehabilitation programs. The emphasis on treatment is encouraged by the belief that it provides a humane alternative to punishment. It is also encouraged by renewed faith in its effectiveness in reducing subsequent involvement in criminal and delinquent behavior. Where it was recently believed that treatment does not work, the question of effectiveness is now answered in advance by advocacy of evidence-based programs. An emphasis on treatment is a blessing for psychologists, social workers, and social service agencies.

Support for neither of these general policies is found in social control theory. Consistent with the theory, potential offenders are not influenced by the threat of legal penalties, and their behavior is not altered by changing the certainty or severity of such penalties. Consistent with the theory, the behavior of people exposed to the criminal justice system is not affected by such exposure. The level of punishment (e.g., the length of sentence) imposed by the system does not affect the likelihood that its wards will be seen again. Put another way, the criminal justice system receives people after they have committed offenses, but it has little or no influence on their prior or subsequent behavior.

Incarceration is sometimes justified on the grounds that it reduces the crime rate by incapacitating offenders. Even if punishment and treatment do not work, the argument goes, people in prison are not committing countable crimes while they are there, though a derivation of this argument from any version of control theory is not supportable.

The idea that crime can be prevented by treating or rehabilitating offenders is contrary to the assumptions of control theory. The theory sees crime as a choice that does not reflect illness or defective judgment but the social circumstances of the actor and the logic of the situation. The renewed enthusiasm for treatment is also not justified by research. As often as not, it seems, the difference between the treatment and control groups is disappointing, or even in the wrong direction. Given the investment in various treatment strategies and the felt need to counterbalance punitive policies, the return of a skeptical view of treatment in the near future is unlikely, but better evidence that treatment works will be required to make it a serious challenge to the control theory perspective.

Crime control strategies that go by such names as *situational crime prevention,* the *routine activity approach,* and *environmental design* are perfectly compatible with control theory. All assume that crimes may be prevented by focusing on the conditions necessary for their occurrence—by reducing their benefits, by making them more hazardous or difficult. Unlike control theory, these approaches focus on one type of crime at a time—burglary, robbery, assault—but they, too, see the potential offender as acting out of choice rather than compulsion. A choosing offender may attack a lone individual but will not consider attacking a member of a group; a choosing offender may enter an unlocked door but refrain from breaking down a door that is securely locked. The beauty of these approaches is that, to the extent they are successful, they eliminate criminals by eliminating crime. Situational crime prevention theorists like to say that "opportunity makes the thief," but a more direct statement of their position would be that "theft makes the thief."

Social control theories typically do not provide specific positive guidance about crime control policy. Those who attack their policy implications tend to focus on the odious implications of "control," suggesting that control theorists favor selective incapacitation and value thoughtless conformity over individual freedom. It may be partly for this reason that control theorists are reluctant to play the policy game, but it may be that the policy implications of control theory are too obvious to bear repeating. If weakened social bonds are the reason crime flourishes, the straightforward way to reduce the crime problem would be to help individuals intensify their relationships with society. How is this to be accomplished? Control theory cannot provide particularly good answers to this question anymore than strain theory can offer unusual insight about how to improve economic conditions among the poor. We do know that stakes in conformity cannot be imposed from without, that society cannot force friends on the friendless. But we know, too, that some conditions are more conducive than others to the creation and maintenance of the natural bonds that make people consider the consequences of their acts for the lives and well-being of others. With such conditions in place, the theory claims, the need for crime control policies is greatly reduced.

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