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ANALYTICAL CRIMINOLOGY: DELINQUENCY, CRIMINALITY AND THE SELF CONTROL THEORY

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Abstract

The self-control theory, introduced by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi in their book *A General Theory of Crime*, is an extensively studied viewpoint in criminology that examines how individual variations in the consideration of the outcomes of their actions can lead to delinquency, crime, and similar behaviours. Advocates contend that individuals who acquire self-discipline at a young age will exhibit significantly lower rates of engagement in delinquency, criminal activities, and other maladaptive behaviours in their later years. Individuals who cultivate significant levels of self-discipline during their childhood are less prone to engaging in delinquent behaviour during adolescence, as well as being less susceptible to arrest or conviction in adulthood. Additionally, they exhibit greater academic achievement, secure more prosperous employment, earn higher incomes, and enjoy improved health outcomes throughout their lifespan.

The Notion of Self-Control

According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, self-control is the capacity to resist instant or short-term gratification that may result in bad outcomes, and instead, prioritise long-term benefits. It pertains to psychological notions such as self-regulation as well as impulsivity, economic ideas like time discounting and skill formation, and sociological concept of social control. In the context of self-control theory, significant adverse outcomes may encompass physical injury, legal penalties, expulsion from educational establishments, as well as disappointment or disapproval from family, teachers, and friends.¹ Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the

¹ Vazsonyi, Alexander T., Jakub Mikuška, and Erin L. Kelley. 2017. "It's Time: A MetaAnalysis on the Self-Control-Deviance Link." *Jour*

majority of criminal behaviour and juvenile delinquency can be interpreted as the quest for immediate and effortless rewards or momentary and fleeting gratification. Consequently, individuals with comparatively low self-control are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour and crime.

Self-control is not considered to be a predisposing factor or a personality characteristic associated with criminal behaviour or delinquency. Self-control is commonly defined as a tendency to prioritise present needs, wants, and desires over long-term considerations, without considering the potential negative outcomes of such behaviour. Self-control theory is a notion of choice rather than determinism.² Self-control, contrary to popular belief, is not exclusively associated with criminal behaviour. Low self-control does not necessarily lead to delinquency or crime, nor does it inherently drive individuals to engage in illegal activities. High self-control can be considered a component of social capital or social advantage, as it contributes to achieving positive outcomes in many life situations and favourable results in social institutions such as school, the job market, and interpersonal relationships.

Control Theories

Self-control theory is categorised within a broader group of crime theories, which encompass social control theory & deterrence theory. These theories all draw upon the foundational principles of the classical approach in criminology.³ These ideas suggest that individuals typically behave based on the principles of rationality & self-interest. These models do not posit the inherent malevolence or immorality of individuals; instead, they posit that all individuals strive to pursue shared motives in alignment with their personal perception of self-interest, with the aim of maximising pleasure and minimising misery.

Control theories in criminology are based on the idea that certain controls can prevent individuals from engaging in antisocial and problematic behaviours that serve their own self-interest. Control theories aim to forecast variations in the arrangement of controls among individuals and groups, thereby indicating the individuals, groups, and environments that are most likely to

² Akers, Ronald L. 1991. "Self-Control as a General Theory of Crime." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 7(2): 201–211.

³ Alwin, Duane F., and Ryan J. McCammon. 2004. "Generations, Cohorts, and Social Change." Pp. 23–50 in *Handbook of the Life Course*, edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. New York: Springer.

exhibit higher levels of delinquency and crime.⁴ Gottfredson and Hirschi assert that personal and societal restrictions are the primary determinants of delinquency and crime. Control theories are commonly known as restraint theories, as the lack of effective restrictions is what leads to variations in criminal behaviour and delinquency across individuals, rather than differences in reasons or incentives for crime.

Self-control theory posits that individuals do not possess an innate inclination towards criminal behaviour, nor are they influenced by socialisation to engage in crime. Instead, persons vary in the degree to which they have cultivated self-control and pay attention to the inhibitory factors in their surroundings that deter criminal and delinquent acts. Self-control & social control theories can be classified as socialisation theories, as they primarily examine the influences that instil conformity to societal norms and rules. These theories operate under the assumption that children need to be educated on how to adhere to these expectations.⁵

Self-control theory posits that there is variation in the degree to which individuals are successfully instructed in these principles during their development. The theory of self-control posits that variations in socialisation during childhood result in a spectrum of individuals' capacity to concentrate on long-term objectives. It suggests that those with lower levels of self-control are more prone to engaging in delinquent & criminal activities compared to those with higher levels of self-control. Once established, variations in self-control persist basically unchanged over the course of one's lifetime. It is undisputed, however, that an individual's self-control can vary, especially before reaching adulthood, and it is not necessarily firmly established at an early age - stability is primarily based on empirical observation.⁶

An Overarching Theory of Criminal Behaviour

Gottfredson and Hirschi expounded upon self-control theory in their book *A General Theory of Crime* and further substantiated, expanded, and defended it through several subsequent publications. Self-control is a crucial component of their crime theory, as it is the primary factor

⁴ Tibbetts, Stephen G., and David L. Myers. 1999. "Low Self-Control, Rational Choice, and Student Test Cheating." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 23(2): 179–200.

⁵ Betsch, Tilmann, Susanne Haberstroh, and Cornelia Höhle. 2002. "Explaining Routinized Decision Making. A Review of Theories and Models," *Theory and Psychology* 12(4): 453–488.

⁶ Simpson, Sally S., and Gilbert Geis. 2008. "The Undeveloped Concept of Opportunity." Pp. 49–60 in *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime*, edited by Erich Goode. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

at the individual level that leads to delinquency and crime.⁷ While they acknowledge many other elements contributing to crime in their theory, they assert that self-control is a fundamental cause of crime due to its significant impact and its influence on numerous other factors. Consequently, it is a primary area of emphasis in their overall theory.

The purpose of constructing self-control theory was to establish a connection between contemporary control theories of crime and significant findings from empirical research on crime and delinquency. Aside from the well-established associations between delinquency and family, school, and peers, there is a significant emphasis on the impact of age, generality, and variety on crime and delinquency. The concept of self-control theory originated from an analysis of the relationship between age and criminal behaviour, as explained by Hirschi and Gottfredson. The distribution of crime by age follows a consistent pattern—delinquency/crime rates experience a significant increase during adolescence, reach their highest point in late adolescence and early adulthood, decrease significantly in early adulthood, and then progressively fall for the rest of one's life. Extensive research indicates that this distribution is commonly observed across various measuring techniques and among individuals, locations, time periods, and types of crimes. The enduring nature of this link renders it resistant to explanation, thereby posing issues for the majority of criminological theories.⁸ This is particularly accurate when it is assessed in conjunction with the stability factor: as individuals age, crime decreases, but variations in the inclination to engage in problematic behaviours continue. The generality or versatility effect refers to the absence of specialisation in the types of delinquencies or crimes committed by offenders. It also refers to the tendency for problem behaviours to occur simultaneously with criminal activities in the same persons.

Hirschi and Gottfredson proposed that the issue of age and stability in theory can be addressed by differentiating between crime, which varies with age, and criminality, which remains constant. Consequently, both ideas are required for a theory to be considered valid. These disparities made them realise the significance of the personal trait of self-control and the need to develop a revised perspective on how crime should be defined in the field of criminology. The idea outlined in A General idea of Crime has gained significant attention and recognition in the

⁷ Britt, Chester L., and Michael R. Gottfredson (Eds.). 2003. *Control Theories of Crime and Delinquency*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

⁸ Seipel, Christian, and Stefanie Eifler. 2010. "Opportunities, Rational Choice, and Self Control on the Interaction of Person and Situation in a General Theory of Crime." *Crime & Delinquency* 56(2): 167–197.

field of criminology, being extensively studied and referenced.⁹

Crime, as defined by Self-Control Theory, refers to any behaviour that violates societal norms and laws, resulting in harm or potential harm to others or society as a whole.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory of crime encompasses several essential components that set it apart from other approaches. The dependent variable for the theory is defined as crime. In the context of self-control theory, crime is characterised as actions that yield immediate gratification but result in eventual adverse outcomes. They have contended that crimes are fundamentally acts of coercion or deception carried out in the quest of personal gain. Gottfredson and Hirschi adopt a behavioural perspective when defining crime, rather than relying on a legal framework. It is important to note that while the majority of criminal and delinquent behaviours meet their criteria, not all of them do.¹⁰ Furthermore, other noncriminal behaviours, such as various types of accidents, substance addiction, bullying, and school misconduct, can be classified as actions that yield immediate advantages but result in eventual drawbacks.

Based on their overarching argument, the majority of delinquent and criminal behaviours are characterised by being impulsive, spontaneous, and reliant on chance occurrences, with minimal need for premeditation. Generally, they can be readily discouraged by barriers like as locks, illumination, or the proximity of other individuals. They frequently entail temporary benefits in interpersonal relationships or the assertion of self-interests. Typically, these promises offer few benefits for the wrongdoer, demand minimal creativity, and do not lead to achievement, social standing, or the resolution of underlying psychological problems. Instead, they offer typical human satisfactions or desires in a seemingly effortless manner, but only by disregarding expenses.

With this description in mind, it becomes apparent that self-control is the underlying factor that explains the correlation between delinquencies, crimes, and other problem behaviours. These behaviours tend to attract persons who possess a relatively low level of self-control. Furthermore, it takes into consideration the absence of specialisation in different forms of

⁹ Burt, Callie H. 2015. "Self-Control and Crime: A Sociological Perspective." Pp. 143–171 in *The Nurture Versus Biosocial Debate in Criminology*, edited by K.M. Beaver, J.C. Barnes, and B.B. Boutwell. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

¹⁰ Seipel, Christian. 1999. *Strategien und Probleme des empirischen Theorienvergleichs in den Sozialwissenschaften. Rational Choice Theorie oder Persönlichkeitstheorie?* Opladen: Leske+Budrich.

criminal activities and the impact of versatility: interpersonal aggression, theft, drug use, accidents, and school misbehaviour are frequently observed to be interconnected due to variations in an individual's self-control.¹¹ Engaging in these problematic actions yields immediate advantages for the individual involved, but also entails the potential for detrimental outcomes for both the individual and others.

The Genesis of Self-Control: Early Childhood and the Role of the Family

The self-control idea is based on the premise that human nature inherently possesses a universal inclination to seek fulfilment of personal needs and desires. When not regulated, the pursuit of these needs and aspirations inevitably leads to conflicts with others and potentially severe effects for the person involved. Consequently, individuals who are concerned about the well-being of the child endeavour to educate the child to refrain from engaging in actions driven by self-interest that may lead to harm, either to oneself or to others, and to prioritise the needs and desires of others. In self-control theory, socialisation is the process where parental care for the child's well-being or conduct is a crucial requirement for effective child-rearing. During the child's development, attentive and caring carers observe and penalise behaviour that is detrimental to the child and others.¹² Consequently, children are instructed to be mindful of the enduring repercussions of their acts. When a compassionate adult is present in the environment of a growing child and actively participates in their socialisation, it leads to the establishment of strong self-control abilities that persist throughout the individual's life. Occasionally, the kid's environment lacks early caregiving due to the absence of an adult who prioritises the child's long-term well-being or because the present carer lacks the required abilities or resources to foster self-control in the child.

As the kid transitions into formal educational settings, the school can have a significant impact on the cultivation of self-discipline. Undoubtedly, self-discipline significantly improves the likelihood of achieving excellent educational outcomes. This idea proposes variations in the level and effectiveness of the socialisation process among different groups, nations, and over

¹¹ Burt, Callie H. 2020 (forthcoming). "Self-Control and Crime: Beyond Gottfredson & Hirschi's Theory." *Annual Review of Criminology* 3.

¹² Sampson, Robert J., and W. Bryon Groves. 1989. "Community Structure and Crime; Testing Social-Disorganization Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 94(4): 774–802.

time. Control theory posits that these disparities give rise to variations in the prevalence of crime, violence, and other deviant behaviours among people, communities, and cultures, as well as over different time periods.¹³

The focus on developing self-control during early childhood, as well as recognising the significant influence of the family and school, aligns with findings from extensive research on the impact of family dynamics on delinquency. Additionally, control group studies have demonstrated that variations in family socialisation methods have an impact on both self-control and delinquency.

Several scholars challenge the validity of these environmental factors and assert that they have identified robust biological factors that contribute to self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the available evidence does not substantiate the assertion that biology compels or dictates certain persons to partake in delinquency or criminal behaviour, or in the specific expressions of the versatility effect.¹⁴ Their self-control theory unequivocally dismisses the notion of a biological inclination towards criminal behaviour or delinquency, while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of biologically influenced variations in susceptibility to contextual factors affecting self-control. However, the compelling evidence for the influence of family and the absence of support for biological compulsion strongly endorse the assertion of self-control theory that socialisation is often achievable, provided that a favourable environmental context exists to foster the cultivation of self-control during childhood.¹⁵ The research in education and economics is increasingly showing that the early familial environment plays a crucial role in the development of individual skills, such as self-control.

The development of self-control theory was prompted by the recognition that individuals exhibit significant variations in their inclination to disregard the future consequences of their behaviour, and that these disparities emerge prior to puberty. The most major consequences of establishing

¹³ Cullen, Francis T., James D. Unnever, John Paul Wright, and Kevin M. Beaver. 2008. "Parenting and Self-Control." Pp. 61–74 in *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime*, edited by Erich Goode. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹⁴ Pratt, Travis C., and Francis T. Cullen. 2000. "The Empirical Status of Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime: A Meta-Analysis." *Criminology* 38(3): 931–964.

¹⁵ De Buck, Ann, and Lieven J.R. Pauwels. 2019 (forthcoming). "Are Impulsive Adolescents Differentially Vulnerable to Normative or Situational Peer Influences? A Partial Replication Study." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 35.

self-control are the fear of disappointing parents, feeling ashamed in front of family and friends, and losing the affection, respect, and acceptance of important individuals in one's life.¹⁶ Over time, these concerns become ingrained and influential aspects of one's identity, persisting throughout one's entire life. Self-control regulates both conscious and unconscious behaviours, preventing unrestricted self-interest, which includes engaging in delinquent and criminal behaviours. This paradigm is supported by a significant amount of recent research from the fields of psychology, sociology, education, and child development.

Essential Information for Self-Control Theory

The construction of self-control theory was initially influenced by extensive study & literature on crime as well as delinquency spanning several decades. This literature serves as a crucial basis for theory, and hence the empirical status of self-control theory is inevitably linked to the ongoing validity of these factors associated with crime and delinquency. The following items are included:

The age distribution of crime, regardless of the type of crime or the individual's attributes, reaches its highest point during late adolescence or early adulthood and then steadily and significantly decreases from this peak.¹⁷

One of the most well-documented findings in delinquency research is that delinquents are less likely to have strong connections with their parents compared to non-delinquents.

The individuals involved in criminal activities exhibit a wide range of diversity in the types of crimes and delinquencies they commit. This adaptability also applies to similar behavioural expressions of limited self-control, including absenteeism, premature termination of education, job insecurity, alcohol misuse, substance abuse, domestic violence, traffic accidents, and unintended pregnancies. The association between the subject's criminality as well as the delinquency of their friends is highly robust in the field.

Based on extensive evaluations of developmental studies on antisocial & delinquent behaviour, it is widely accepted that the variations in antisocial behaviour tend to be quite consistent after

¹⁶ Pratt, Travis C., and Jonathon A. Cooper. 2009. "Self-Control Theory." Pp. 288–295 in *21st Century Criminology. A Reference Handbook*, edited by J. Mitchell Miller. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

¹⁷ Fishbein, Martin, and Icek Ajzen. 2010. *Predicting and Changing Behavior. The Reasoned Action Approach*. New York and Hove: Psychology Press.

they are initially detected. Antisocial behaviour exhibited at a young age is a reliable indicator of future antisocial behaviour in maturity.¹⁸

Academic performance is a powerful indicator of engagement in delinquent and criminal behaviours. Individuals that excel academically are improbable to engage in criminal activities. The correlation between early delinquency and later delinquency offers two essential components that differentiate the general theory from other perspectives. Firstly, it emphasises the significant role of early childhood in the development of criminal behaviour and delinquency. Secondly, it highlights how childhood factors contributing to problem behaviours can have a lasting impact on subsequent causes later in life. The phenomenon known as the versatility effect can be attributed to the nature of self-control. This effect refers to the observation that several delinquent behaviours, crimes, and other problematic actions tend to occur together. Specifically, interpersonal aggression, theft, drug use, accidents, and school misbehaviour are frequently observed in conjunction with one another.¹⁹ All of these challenges are accompanied with behaviours that yield immediate benefits for the individual involved. However, each option also entails the potential for adverse repercussions. The distinguishing factor among individuals lies not in the potential advantages that such actions may offer, but rather in the tendency of some individuals to disregard the possible drawbacks associated with these actions and nevertheless carry them out.

The robust and enduring associations between parental attachment and delinquency, as well as school and teacher attachment and academic achievement, strongly indicate that self-control is nurtured through these relationships. Furthermore, the ability of parents and schools to effectively instil self-control or cultivate children's concern for and commitment to their long-term goals plays a significant role in this process.

The empirical validity of these fundamental facts has been widely accepted by empirically focused criminologists for many years. Recent study consistently confirms their validity.

¹⁸ Piquero, Alex R. 2008. "Measuring Self-Control." Pp. 26–37 in *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime*, edited by Erich Goode. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹⁹ Goode, Erich (Ed.). 2008. *Out of Control: Assessing the General Theory of Crime*. Assessing the General Theory of Crime. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Empirical Experiments Assessing Self-Control Theory

The notions of self-control & self-regulation are extensively studied in various disciplines, including psychology, public health, education, and criminology. For instance, in the extensively referenced Dunedin, New Zealand, longitudinal research, the ability to govern oneself throughout childhood was found to be a strong predictor of the participants' future financial and social status, income, substance abuse, overall health, and criminal records.

Summarising the substantial study literature on many aspects of the notion of self-control is challenging. A significant portion of the research primarily examines the quantification of self-control and its correlation with delinquency, criminality, or similar behaviours. Additional work examines the characteristics that contribute to self-control and the familial aspects linked to crime in a broader sense.²⁰ However, there is further relevant work that specifically examines Hirschi's previous explanation of social control variables. These elements are crucial in understanding self-control since they establish the primary consequences of unrestricted pursuit of personal interests. Some evidence is obtained from research that initially focused on variables unrelated to crime, such as education or health. The hypothesis is pertinent to policy studies that specifically examine the effects of deterrence, incapacitation, & other presumed impacts of the criminal justice system. Similarly, studies that directly investigate the impacts of age, stability, and adaptability in criminology are also present. Consequently, the subsequent summary is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to encompass evidence types that are highly pertinent to the overall credibility of self-control theory in relation to crime and delinquency.²¹

Research on the Causal Connection between Self-Control and Criminal Behaviour

Contemporary research consistently shows that measures of self-control in childhood are strongly correlated with problem behaviours across many measuring methods, study designs, and professions. According to Franken, Moffitt, and their team, impaired childhood self-control

²⁰ Opp, Karl-Dieter. 2018. "Can Attitude Theory Improve Rational Choice Theory or Vice Versa? A Comparison and Integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior and ValueExpectancy Theory." Pp. 65–95 in *Einstellungen und Verhalten in der empirischen Sozialforschung. Analytische Konzepte, Anwendungen und Analyseverfahren. Festschrift für Dieter Urban zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Mayerl. Jochen, Thomas Krause, Andreas Wahl, and Marius Wuketich. New York: Springer VS

²¹ Gottfredson, Michael R. 2006. "The Empirical Status of Control Theory in Criminology." Pp. 77–100 in *Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory*, edited by Francis Cullen, John Wright, and Kristie Blevins. New York: Routledge.

is extremely significant because it is linked to a multitude of negative life experiences, including substance use, criminal behaviour, dropping out of school, unplanned teenage pregnancies, and negative long-term health and financial outcomes. Additionally, adolescents with lower self-control are more prone to associating with delinquent peers.

The existing body of research has mostly examined the correlation between self-control and individual traits, as well as the intensity of this correlation across various geographical locations or cultures, different categories of criminal activity or other problematic behaviours, and during different time periods.²² Vazsonyi et al. demonstrate the impact of self-control on both males and females across four distinct nations and five different age cohorts. Vazsonyi and Crosswhite demonstrate comparable findings among African American and Caucasian adolescents. DeLisi demonstrates the impact of self-control on those who have committed offences, while Baron presents evidence of this impact specifically in relation to property crime, drug use, and violent crime among homeless juveniles. Tittle et al. demonstrate that the association between self-control and diverse demographic groups, including nonstudent adults, college students, youths, males and females, individuals with and without official criminal records, and individuals from different nations and locations, remains consistent. Tittle and colleagues contend that various measures of self-control are indicative of a wide range of behaviours. Several indicators of self-control are found to be predictive of various forms of misconduct in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, as well as in experimental participants.

Vazsonyi and colleagues demonstrate consistent self-control effects among teenage samples in the United States, Switzerland, Hungary, and the Netherlands. Moffitt et al. establish the significance of self-control in New Zealand. The concept of self-control has been employed to elucidate variations both within Japan and in Spain. Vazsonyi et al. demonstrate the impact of self-control in 11 distinct nations.

Perrone et al. reference 13 research that examine various types of crimes and similar behaviours, providing evidence for the correlation between self-control and criminal activity. Vazsonyi et al. demonstrate the impact of theft, assault, substance abuse, vandalism, and overall deviant behaviour. DeLisi examines misconduct among active offenders, Junger and Tremblay focus on

²² Nagin, Daniel S., and Greg Pogarsky. 2001. "Integrating Celerity, Impulsivity, and Extra-legal Sanction Threats into a Model of General Deterrence: Theory and Evidence." *Criminology* 39(4): 865–891.

serious delinquency, Sellers study intimate violence, Brownfield and Sorenson along with Gibbs et al. analyse crime, Wright and Cullen explore occupational delinquency among juveniles, LeBlanc and Girard investigate various delinquent acts and drug use in French-speaking Canadian samples, DeLisi also examines general delinquency in a national probability sample of adolescents, Blickle et al. study white-collar offending, and Gibbs et al. analyse general deviance.

The literature has remarkable examples showcasing the wide range of adaptability effects and the correlation between self-control and problem behaviours in general. Junger and Tremblay present compelling evidence linking accidents to delinquency and self-control to other problem behaviours. Perrone et al. have extensively documented the correlation between self-control and various analogous behaviours. These behaviours include cheating, drug use, accidents, traffic risks, school truancy, misbehaviour, dropout rates, and school problems.²³ Nakhaie, Silverman, and LaGrange have specifically studied school problems, while Keane et al. focused on accidents and Gibbs and Giever examined cheating. Zhang et al. explored the relationship between self-control and drinking, drug use, and delinquency among adolescents. Tangney et al. investigated the impact of self-control on grade point averages, self-esteem, binge eating, alcohol abuse, interpersonal relationships, and optimal emotional responses.²⁴ Martino et al. found a connection between self-control and cigarette use, early unwed parenthood, and early marriage. Unnever and Cornell studied the relationship between self-control and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and bullying. Jones and Quisenberry examined the impact of self-control on risky sexual behaviour, driving behaviour, academic dishonesty, and gambling among college students. Lastly, Baron explored the connection between self-control and unemployment and homelessness. Pinker asserts that the significant factor behind the overall decrease in violence over the course of millennia is primarily attributed to changes in self-control.²⁵

²³ Gottfredson, Michael R. 2011. "Sanctions, Situations, and Agency in Control Theories of Crime." *European Journal of Criminology* 8(2): 128–143.

²⁴ Nagin, Daniel S., and Raymond Paternoster. 1993. "Enduring Individual Differences and Rational Choice Theories of Crime." *Law and Society Review* 27(3): 467–496.

²⁵ Gottfredson, Michael R. 2013. "A Note on the Role of Basic Theory in Thinking About Crime Prevention." *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 19(2): 91–97.

Systematic Reviews and Comprehensive Evaluations of Self-Control Research

Several meta-analyses have particularly examined the correlation between self-control, as defined by Gottfredson and Hirschi, and delinquency or criminality. All of this research consistently demonstrate that self-control is linked to delinquency, criminality, and other problematic behaviours. The study conducted by Pratt and Cullen focused on rigorously conducted research published from 1993 to 1999, which has been highly referenced. Self-control theory has emerged as a highly important theoretical framework over the past century, demonstrating its durability via numerous thorough empirical examinations.²⁶

Therefore, when examining reviews of the most rigorous studies, it is regularly found that self-control theory demonstrates robust validity across all fields and approaches. Reviews indicate that the theory has one of the most robust empirical foundations in the field of criminology.

The empirical evidence has shown a remarkable link between low self-control and numerous antisocial consequences. Multiple studies have specifically examined the theory and have discovered that individuals with low self-control are likely to experience difficulties in various aspects of their lives.²⁷ These include family relationships, dating, religious involvement, education, career status, risky driving behaviour, misconduct at work, association with criminals, adherence to criminal justice system rules, and living in disorderly neighbourhoods. In addition, individuals with low self-control exhibit a considerably higher propensity to partake in activities such as alcohol consumption, substance abuse, smoking, gambling, as well as engaging in various forms of criminal behaviour including violence, property crimes, white-collar crimes, and nuisance offences. Furthermore, they are also more susceptible to being victims themselves.

Evidence of Validity Derived from Policy Studies: A Comparison between Criminal Justice Programmes and Childhood Prevention Programmes

Gottfredson and Hirschi assert that self-control theory has significant ramifications for public policies concerning delinquency and crime. The emphasis on early-childhood socialisation and

²⁶ Milyavskaya, Marina, Elliot T. Berkman, and Denise T.D. De Ridder. 2019. "The Many Faces of Self-Control: Tacit Assumptions and Recommendations to Deal with Them." *Motivation Science* 5(1): 79–85

²⁷ Gottfredson, Michael R. 2017 (online publication). "Self-Control Theory and Crime." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*: 1–25.

the family offers a distinct public policy alternative to the prevailing approach of incarceration and law enforcement in addressing criminal behaviour. Given that the primary factors contributing to crime often stem from early childhood experiences, there is significant potential in initiatives that allocate resources towards providing child care services for populations with a higher risk of engaging in criminal behaviour. Abundant empirical research examining the impact of parenting or child carer interventions on delinquency and other problematic behaviours consistently demonstrates significant reductions in delinquency rates.²⁸

Gottfredson, Hirschi, Moffitt, and others contend that the enduring nature of self-control offers a compelling rationale to explore the possible advantages of prioritising early life and fostering self-control in the context of crime prevention strategy. The emerging body of research, which is based on robust research methodologies, unequivocally confirms that significant and enduring preventive outcomes can be attained by influencing early childhood experiences with the intention of improving socialisation and monitoring. Greenwood's meticulous examination offers a categorization of six distinct types of efficacious programmes, spanning from in-home visits conducted by nurses to parental instruction. Piquero and colleagues conducted meta-analyses on research examining parenting practises with children aged 5 and below. Heckman discovered a range of data on early-childhood education that supports his theory that different family contexts contribute to the development of abilities that are crucial for crime and health, as well as success in school and the workplace. As an economist, he strongly asserts that the societal financial benefits of early intervention far surpass those of later interventions, such as those provided by the criminal justice system.

Gottfredson contended that these investigations, which intentionally create differences in socialisation and monitoring experiences and include thorough follow-up assessments, should be regarded as validation studies for self-control theories. These studies change the levels of self-control in experimental groups and compare the results with randomly selected non-intervention groups.²⁹ The self-control improvements clearly demonstrate an impact on delinquency, providing strong support for the theory and its focus on early familial ties.

²⁸ Meehl, Paul E. 1950. "On the Circularity of the Law of Effect." *Psychological Bulletin* 47(1): 52–75.

²⁹ Gottfredson, Michael R. 2018. "General Theory and Global Criminology: Childhood Environments, Problem Behaviors, and a Focus on Prevention." *Asian Journal of Criminology* 13(4): 347–365.

Considering the age, stability, and generality impacts, it is evident that early intervention-based prevention would be a more economically efficient and impactful approach to reducing crime compared to adult interventions like policing and incarceration. The prospect of imposing stringent future consequences is unlikely to significantly influence the conduct of those who are unaware or indifferent to their existence. Studies on law enforcement support this anticipation, as does the commonly accepted conclusion that extended incarceration has no impact on crime rates. The latest findings of a panel from the National Research Council are enlightening in this regard. One of the key conclusions is that the additional deterrent impact of longer jail sentences is, at most, minor. The Research Council also criticises the use of imprisonment as a means of incapacitation. This is because as inmates age during their time in jail, the likelihood of them reoffending decreases significantly. Therefore, long prison terms are an ineffective method of preventing crime through incapacitation. Considering the alignment between these findings and the forecasts of self-control theory, it is suitable to regard the absence of severity effects and incapacitation effects in criminal justice as a confirmation of the theory.³⁰

The hypothesis of self-control aligns well with the substantial research about situational crime prevention. These policies aim to exploit the concept that certain criminal activities can be decreased by diminishing the appeal of the target to potential offenders or by implementing visible obstacles to deter them. The plausibility of crime-specific approaches aligns with self-control theory, which posits that most crimes are opportunistic behaviours driven by environmental factors rather than strong, individual drives. Indeed, the efficacy of programmes that clearly establish immediate consequences might be seen as validation studies for predictions of self-control.³¹

Current Studies on the Effects of Age, Generality, and Stability

Considerable study interest has focused on examining the effects of age, generality, and stability during the past few decades, partly due to the conflicting assumptions between general theory and the criminal career viewpoint. Consequently, a substantial body of empirical research has emerged, employing diverse methodologies, definitions, and sample sizes. Multiple recent

³⁰ Mamayek, Chae, Ray Paternoster, and Thomas A. Loughran. 2017. "Temporal Discounting, Present Orientation, and Criminal Deterrence." Pp. 209–227 in *The Oxford Handbook of Offender Decision Making*, edited by Wim Bernasco, Henk Elffers, and Jean-Louis Van Gelder. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³¹ Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

studies in each of these domains have aimed to consolidate the existing body of literature on these subjects within the framework of self-control theory.

The findings from the extensive search conducted over several decades for significant deviations from the commonly accepted age-crime pattern, especially among serious offenders or individuals whose level of criminal activity remains high as they age, support the age-invariance hypothesis and its consequences for theory as well as policy.

The criminal career paradigm posits that the rate of offending remains consistent over the duration of the criminal career. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of crimes are perpetrated by adolescents, reaching their highest levels in the mid-teenage years for property offences as well as the late teenage years for violent offences.³² However, these rates rapidly decrease afterwards. By utilising group-based trajectory modelling, it has been observed that the criminal behaviour of all identified groups experiences a sharp decline as they age.

Laub and Sampson's study, which is considered one of the most significant investigations into criminal professions, provides additional precise details on this matter: The typical age trend is observed even among individuals who were specifically chosen for their involvement in major and chronic delinquent behaviour. Laub and Sampson characterise the relationship between age and crime among major offenders in their data as a fractal pattern inside the larger distribution. The interpretation of age data for offenders might be problematic in certain samples, especially in research that utilise statistical trajectory approaches. Recent, unbiased evaluations of this statistical classification literature do not discover consistent evidence for significant variations in distributions based on age. Ershova, Matsueda, and Telesca conducted a comprehensive analysis of taxonomic research spanning twenty years. Their goal was to identify distinct groups of serious offenders who deviate from the typical age distribution of criminal behaviour. The researchers found that the trajectory groups in criminology generally display shapes that are weakly unimodal, meaning they have a single peak. However, there are variations in the intensity and timing of offending among these groups. This discovery aligns with the age-invariance hypothesis put out by Hirschi and Gottfredson. Empirically identified trajectory groups fail to demonstrate the life-course persistent group, which exhibits a consistent rate of criminal

³² Malzkorn, Wolfgang. 2001. "Defining Disposition Concepts: A Brief History of the Problem." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 32(2): 335–353.

behaviour as predicted by criminal career and dual taxonomy approaches.

The self-control theory posits that the impact of age on criminal behaviour and similar actions remains consistent regardless of social and cultural circumstances, and is applicable to all demographic groups. It may be inferred that it produces stability and versatility effects, and it facilitates the development of a comprehensive theory by demonstrating that many actions occurring throughout one's life are driven by shared factors. This has ramifications for social policy and the design of research. This suggests that self-control methods that are similar in concept will have comparable benefits across different age groups, and that policies such as incapacitation are not useful in reducing crime rates.³³ Therefore, it systematically arranges a vast array of criminological discoveries in a coherent manner. The extensive range of studies that supports age invariance consistently indicates that it is the most plausible interpretation of the scientific findings.

Despite the presence of some statistical evidence indicating a minor level of specialisation in crime-type among large groups of repeat offenders, the prevailing trend in research still emphasises generality or adaptability. According to Farrington, criminal behaviour is characterised by versatility rather than specialisation, encompassing activities such as excessive alcohol consumption, dangerous driving, engaging in several sexual partners, bullying, and skipping school. A substantial corpus of empirical research has expanded the scope of the flexibility concept beyond its conventional meanings of crime and delinquency, encompassing accidents, health, and welfare behaviours.³⁴ According to DeLisi and Piquero, there exists a substantial body of study on the concepts of offence specialisation and/or adaptability. One key finding is that the majority of criminals, or almost all offenders, are generalists.

The stability idea of self-control theory has garnered study scrutiny, as certain scholars have raised doubts about the robustness of the finding as a foundation for self-control theory. Self-control theory is founded on the well-established observation of a significant association

³³ Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi. 2003. "Self-Control and Opportunity." Pp. 5–20 in *Advances in Criminological Theory*, Volume 12, edited by Chester L. Britt and Michael R. Gottfredson. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

³⁴ Malzkorn, Wolfgang. 2000. "Realism, Functionalism and the Conditional Analysis of Dispositions." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50(201): 452–469.

between early delinquency measurements and future criminal behaviour.³⁵ The enduring nature of variations in criminal behaviour, juvenile delinquency, and problematic actions throughout one's life is a widely documented observation in the area. However, it is important to note that this association is not without exceptions or flawless consistency. The empirical finding provides strong evidence that a persistent individual attribute or skill is a significant source. Gottfredson and Hirschi emphasise that the fact that self-control is not caused, cannot change, can be judged by the same indications at all points in life, or cannot be purposely manipulated. The available research strongly supports the hypothesis that variations in self-control may be assessed at an early stage of development, and that these variations are indicative of future involvement in criminal activities as well as transitions between various social, educational, and interpersonal roles during the course of one's lifetime.

The stability of the personal trait of self-control, as proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi, and the long-lasting effects of self-control, as claimed by Moffitt and her colleagues, are deduced from the assessment of problem behaviours at various time intervals. Researchers often rely on self-reported attitudinal or personality tests to study short-term fluctuations in self-control. However, it is important to note that these instruments themselves have significant inaccuracy. The lack of reliability is intertwined with the consistency of self-control, leading to inaccurate assessments of stability. Regardless, new research does not modify Farrington's assertion that there is significant consistency in criminal behaviour and antisocial actions from childhood through adolescence to maturity.³⁶ This indicates that there is a consistent pattern in the ranking of individuals based on their level of antisocial behaviour across time. It also suggests that individuals who engage in a significant number of offences during one stage of their life are very likely to continue doing so throughout another stage of their life.

Assessing self-control is a dynamic and significant field of study and discussion on self-control theory. The superiority of behavioural measurement of self-control over self-reported measures can be convincingly argued. An important area for future research is determining the appropriate methods for assessing self-control at various stages during one's life.³⁷

³⁵ Grasmick, Harold G., Charles R. Tittle, Robert J. Bursik Jr., and Bruce J. Arneklev. 1993. "Testing the Core Implications of Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30(1): 5–22

³⁶ Loughran, Thomas A., Ray Paternoster, and Douglas Weiss. 2012. "Hyperbolic Time Discounting, Offender Time Preferences and Deterrence." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 28(4): 607–628.

³⁷ Hay, Carter, and Ryan Meldrum. 2016. *Self-Control and Crime Over the Life Course*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Investigation on the Effects of Self-Control Selection vs Treatment

Self-control theory posits that an individual's level of self-control has an impact on their decision-making, social connections, and group memberships to varying extents over the course of their life. Personal traits such as self-control will impact the choices individuals make when selecting friends, lovers, and institutional affiliations. Nonexperimental research that lacks random assignment faces challenges in determining the impact of affiliations, such as peers, marriage partners, or jobs, on individual crime rates compared to the influence of self-control. It is difficult to ascertain whether these affiliations are the main cause or if they simply contribute to the expected decline in crime rates with age. Due to the inherent challenges of conducting random allocation studies, researchers seek alternative matching designs or noncontrol group methodologies to establish causal effects of treatments. Currently, impartial evaluations contend that the findings of this study on adult transitions can be equally utilised to substantiate both interpretations. Peer groups play an equally dynamic and contentious role in the empirical literature.³⁸ Gottfredson and Hirschi highlight various implications of self-control theory for investigating peer influences, including limitations associated with self-reported assessments of peer delinquency and selection biases. The most robust current research supports their views, nevertheless, due to the fundamental importance of peer impacts in numerous delinquency theories, ongoing research on this subject will continue.

The Significance of Self-Control Theory in Criminology

Following Gottfredson and Hirschi's original assertion, self-control has emerged as a fundamental theoretical notion in the field of criminology. The majority of texts in the field of criminology and juvenile delinquency extensively discuss the assertions made by the general theory of crime, the influence of self-control in the aetiology of crime, and, more recently, the practical implications of self-control theory in policy-making. The self-control theory is widely recognised for its simplicity, clarity, broad applicability, and ability to stimulate further research and discussion among scholars.³⁹ Self-control theory has demonstrated exceptional performance as a scientific hypothesis in the field of criminology. The incorporation of control theories into various integrated theories serves as an indication that significant benefits can be obtained by

³⁸ Lösel, Friedrich. 2017. "Self-Control as a Theory of Crime: A Brief Stocktaking after 27/42 Years." Pp. 232–238 in *Liber Amicorum for Gerben Bruinsma*, edited by Catrien Bijleveld and Peter. Van der Laan. The Hague: Boom.

³⁹ Hempel, Carl G. 1952. *Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

adhering to the principles of the theory.⁴⁰

In the field of social and behavioural sciences, there is a growing recognition and empirical evidence supporting the concepts of self-control and self-regulation, which also have significant policy consequences. The significance of early-childhood surroundings for long-term positive outcomes and the acquisition of benefits for individuals in society warrants attention.⁴¹ According to Moffitt et al., communities expect children to possess the ability to defer pleasure, control impulses, and regulate emotional expression. This is a fundamental and widespread requirement, and the ability to exercise self-control is crucial for success in various aspects of life.⁴²



⁴⁰ Ishaan Deepak Joshi, 'Psychoanalysing Delinquency: Object Relations, Aggression and the Unconscious Mind' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 187-201. Available at www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/.

⁴¹ Ishaan Deepak Joshi, 'Self-Identity, Symbolic Interactionism and Criminal Behavior: The Labelling Theory Standpoint' (2023) 2 IJHRLR 165-175. Available at www.humanrightlawreview.in/vol-2-issue-4/.

⁴² Joshi, I. (2023). Critical Analysis & Reformulation Of The Frustration-Aggression Theory. Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research, V(III). <https://www.ijllr.com/post/critical-analysis-reformulation-of-the-frustration-aggression-theory>