



Low Self-Control and Crime*

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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

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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]

. . . 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) . . .

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 . . .

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) . . .

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 non-criminal 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 . . .

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 non-delinquents 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.¹

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).²

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.³ 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. . . .