

improper socialization leads to nonconformity. Delinquency is one consequence of improper socialization. Carl Bell, director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says adults provide a protective shield in controlling youthful behavior. "To a great extent, children are all gasoline and no brakes. It's incumbent on parents, families, schools, and society to provide them with those brakes—with expectations, rules, monitoring, and social-emotional skills" (Shelton, 2010).

The essence of control theory is that delinquent behavior occurs because it is not prevented in the first place. There are several different versions of this theory. One states that the delinquent lacks either strong inner controls and/or strong outer controls (Reckless, 1961). The former refer to things such as a positive self-image or strong ego, while the latter refer to strong family controls, community controls, legal controls, and so on. Another version maintains that many youths commit delinquent acts because they rationalize deviance before it occurs—that is, they neutralize the normal moral beliefs they have learned while growing up. For example, they deny that there is a victim by saying things like "He had it coming," or they deny that there was any real harm by saying something like "No one was really hurt" or "They won't miss it" (Sykes and Matza, 1957).

The most popular version is the one put forth by sociologist Travis Hirschi (1969). According to Hirschi, all humans are basically anti-social, and all are capable of committing a crime. What keeps most of us in check (i.e., prevents us from deviating) is what he calls the "social bond to society," especially the norms of society that we have internalized. There are four major elements of this bond, as shown in Figure 7.5 (Hirschi, 1969: 16–34).

This theory is very popular (although many do not express it as "control theory"), as most people believe these traditional values about what is and is not appropriate role behavior for young people. Furthermore, juvenile justice workers practice this every day as they try to, in a sense, *reattach* delinquents to family, school, and so on; to get them to *commit* themselves to the demands of

1. **Attachment**—This refers to ties of affection and respect between kids and parents, teachers, and friends; attachment to parents is most important because it is from them that they obtain the norms and values of the surrounding society and internalize them (very similar to Freud's superego but more conscious than his term).
2. **Commitment**—Similar to Freud's concept of ego, except it is expressed in terms of the extent to which kids are committed to the ideal requirements of childhood, such as getting an education, postponing participation in adult activities (e.g., working full-time, living on your own, getting married), or dedication to long-term goals; if they develop a stake in conformity, then engaging in delinquent behavior would endanger their future.
3. **Involvement**—Similar to the conventional belief that "idle hands are the devil's workshop"; in other words, large amounts of unstructured time may decrease the ties to the social bond; those busy doing conventional things, such as chores at home, homework, sports, camping, working, or dating, do not have time for delinquency.
4. **Belief**—This refers simply to the belief in the law, especially the morality of the law (e.g., belief that stealing is just plain wrong).

FIGURE 7.5 Hirschi's four elements of the social bond.

childhood; to *involve* them in conventional activities; and to help them acquire a *belief* and respect for the law. This theory becomes an important starting point for the social development model and the risk-focused approach of delinquency prevention.

Johnstone, quoted earlier concerning strain theory, suggests that purely ecological explanations of gangs are limited "and cannot account for why gangs influence only some of the boys who live in gang neighborhoods...." Continuing, he notes that the opportunity to join a gang "is established by the external social environment, but the decision to do so is governed by social and institutional attachments and by definitions of self.... The transition from unaffiliated to gang-affiliated delinquency occurs at the point that a boy comes to believe that he has nothing further to gain by not joining a gang" (Johnstone, 1983: 297).

One recent study confirms control theory. Extensive studies of various ethnic gangs by Vigil and Yun led them to conclude that the common theme for all these gangs is that the weakening of the bonds identified by Hirschi sort of "frees" these youths "from social control and encourages deviant behavior." The study by Vigil and Yun, based on interviews of 150 incarcerated gang members from four ethnic groups (Vietnamese, Chicano, black, and Hispanic), confirms the social control thesis (Vigil and Yun, 1996).

Informal social control networks within communities contribute to social bonding. Todd Clear (2002) notes that three levels of informal social control lessen the extent of crime: 1) what people do privately within their intimate relationships; 2) what people do collectively in their relationships with others in the community; and 3) people's attitudes toward criminal behavior. The most common forms of social control originate in the privacy of child rearing. Collective methods of social control extend the lessons through a variety of associations and groups. These include churches, businesses, social clubs, volunteer groups, youth groups, neighborhood associations, and many more. Such social controls fall between the most formal controls (e.g., police) and family controls. Participation in these associations occupies a lot of free time for young people. This is one reason why after-school and summer activities are so important. In short, close bonding to these kinds of groups reduces the likelihood of delinquency (Clear, 2002). One study verified the assertion that students with low commitments to education are more likely to become delinquent (McCartan and Gunnison, 2007). Another study found that youths who participated in structured activities with adult leaders became better adjusted and were less likely to engage in delinquent behavior. This relates to the "involvement" part of the social bond (Persson, Kerr, and Stattin, 2007).

One variation of this perspective centers on the issue of self-control or lack thereof. Containment theory argues that there are both internal and external forces that influence the lives and behavior of juveniles. By internal, we mean personal factors such as anxiety, discontent, and hostility. By external factors, we are referring to various social forces, including significant others (especially the family) and the surrounding subculture. By developing both inner (e.g., self-control, positive self-concept) and outer (e.g., strong and supportive family) "containment," an individual will be able to resist involvement in delinquent