

# Exploring theoretical linkages between self-control theory and criminal justice system processing<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Using Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control construct for theoretical leverage, this conceptual article offers a preliminary framework for examining discretion, criminal justice decision-making, and criminal justice system behavior. Low self-control likely facilitates negative interactions between defendants, police, judicial officers, and correctional staff, potentially affecting discretionary outcomes. Research questions are provided for future investigators to begin empirical assessment of the relationships between self-control and criminal justice processing. As a global construct, self-control could be incorporated into criminal justice models as a potentially robust correlate of discretion, decision-making, recidivism, and offender noncompliance with the criminal justice system.

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## Introduction

Recently, Bernard and Engel (2001) issued a call to criminologists to advance and promote theorization in criminal justice. Noting that researchers commonly segregated criminal justice inquiry into three domains (police, courts, and corrections), they suggested that a unified approach was needed to fully understand the criminal justice system and its effects.<sup>1</sup> The current research sought to answer their call by using Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control concept

to construct a theoretical framework for the examination of assorted criminal justice system outcomes. To date, research showed that low self-control was an important predictor of crime and analogously deviant behaviors (for reviews, see Britt & Gottfredson, 2003; Pratt & Cullen, 2000). Unfortunately, the relevance of self-control theory to criminal justice had been understudied. This was a potentially glaring hole in the literature. Due to the negative characteristics inherent in low self-control, criminal defendants were possibly disadvantaged when interacting with criminal justice personnel and could even receive differential treatment. Moreover, complying with the conditions of criminal justice sanctions was theoretically unlikely for offenders with low self-control. As a global construct, it could be an important determinant of recidivism, offender noncompliance with the criminal justice system, and criminal justice system processing.

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Self-control theory and the extant literature were used to explore the personality and lifestyle of the modal conventional or street criminal offender.<sup>2</sup> Like Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) who sought to use the constitutional elements of crime to arrive at a truthful conceptualization of the actor, the current work sought to provide an empirically-based profile of typical criminal offenders. Research questions were provided in the three constitutive domains of criminal justice, police, courts, and corrections so that future investigators could empirically assess the relevance of self-control theory to criminal justice outcomes.

### **Self-control, offender personality, and offender lifestyle**

Over time and across contexts, self-control is a relatively stable engine that drives and produces many behaviors. For a moment, consider the characteristics of people who embody great self-control. Images that come to mind are contemplative, cautious, disciplined, cognitive, composed, judicious, and prudent (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 89). Persons with great self-control tend to exercise good judgment, are likely to succeed, make sacrifices for more fruitful long-term goals, and never seem to be “out of control.” Few of these characterizations appear to describe the disposition of conventional criminals.

Instead, conventional criminals are characterized by a constellation of more negative traits. Persons with low self-control prefer immediate gratification of their desires, pursue simple tasks rather than activities that require tenacity, value physical rather than verbal or cognitive experiences, enjoy quick returns on long-term commitments such as marriage or occupational/educational careers, are generally employed in low-skilled versus intellectual endeavors, and are self-centered, insensitive, and unconcerned with the feelings of others. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 111, *italics added*), “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. [I]n this sense, *self-control is the only enduring personal characteristic predictive of criminal (and related) behavior.*” Indeed, the stability of low self-control was empirically supported (Arneklev, Cochran, & Gainey, 1998; Turner & Piquero, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

The overarching empirical finding from self-control research was that individuals with low self-control lead lives characterized by antisocial behavior and its attendant unfortunate outcomes (Forde & Kennedy,

1997; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993; Higgins, 2004, 2005; Junger & Tremblay, 1999; Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Schreck, 1999; Schreck, Wright, & Miller, 2002; Sorensen, 1994; Wiebe, 2003). For instance, Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, and Benson (1997, pp. 490–491) found that low self-control was related in the hypothesized direction to quality of family relationships, attachment to church, having criminal associates and values, educational attainment and occupational status, living in a ‘bad neighborhood,’ and going out at night (e.g., to bars). It could be said that low self-control essentially constituted a syndrome because of the overlapping problems that it caused (Britt & Gottfredson, 2003; DeLisi, 2003; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994).<sup>4</sup>

With self-control as a frame of reference, other areas of inquiry could be used to showcase the generality of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s thesis. For example, although not its intended research purpose, recent ethnographic research showcased the assorted effects of low self-control in the lives of street criminals. Their lives were characterized by pathological substance abuse, involvement in illicit economies such as prostitution and drug sales, and unbridled irresponsibility. School, work, even basic necessities such as food, sleep, and shelter were ignored or superseded by the short-term orientation of a helter-skelter criminal lifestyle (e.g., Gaarder & Belknap, 2002, pp. 492–499; Hochstetler, 2001; Welle & Falkin, 2000, p. 54).

In sum, self-control theory posited individuals who lead generally unsuccessful lives where opportunities at school, work, and home were poised for failure (Gibson, Wright, & Tibbetts, 2000; Tremblay & Pare, 2003). Poorly controlled persons engaged in behaviors and placed themselves in social settings that were conducive for involvement in crime as both offender and victim. At times, these persons viewed themselves and their local life circumstances as the outcome of cruel, external forces, not their own shortcomings. With this disposition and behavioral repertoire, the offender interacted with criminal justice personnel, and, perhaps inevitably, set the stage for multiple opportunities for failure.<sup>5</sup>

### **Offender self-control and the police**

Nearly everyone, especially during adolescence, engages in conduct that, if detected by the police, could result in an arrest. Approximately 30 percent of those are actually arrested in their lifetime, however. The criminal career paradigm provided compelling evidence that individual-level variation in offending was the primary explanation for why certain people

were frequently arrested and others eluded arrest. Simply, the frequency, intensity, and duration of involvement in multiple forms of crime among a cadre of individuals best explained variation in the probability of arrest (e.g., Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986; DeLisi, 2005; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Tracy, 2002; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972).

Criminality is not the only reason differentiating non-arrestees from arrestees, however. Criminal justice decision-making is influenced by an array of extra-legal factors, which manifest most visibly in the discretionary decisions made by police officers. Although there has been disagreement among some scholars regarding the spuriousness of demeanor once controlling for crime and other arrest factors (cf. Klinger, 1994, 1996; Lundman, 1996), it was generally understood that hostile, belligerent, or excessively disrespectful demeanor was a strong determinant of arrest (Black & Reiss, 1970; Engel, Sobol, & Worden, 2000; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Sun & Payne, 2004; Swatt, 2002; Wilson, 1968). In their classic study of police behavior, Piliavin and Briar (1964, pp. 210–211) concluded, “The cues used by police to assess demeanor were fairly simple. Juveniles who were contrite about their infractions, respectful to officers, and fearful of the sanction that might be employed against them tended to be viewed by patrolmen as basically law-abiding or at least ‘salvageable...’ [I]n contrast, youthful offenders who were fractious, obdurate, or who appeared nonchalant in their encounters with patrolmen were likely to be viewed as ‘would-be tough guys’ or ‘punks’ who fully deserved the most severe sanction: arrest.”

Offender demeanor not only increased the likelihood of arrest but also raised the specter of being disrespected by police officers. For example, Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey (2002) recently used observational data of 3,130 citizen-police encounters in two cities to study how suspect behavior, suspect characteristics, and location affected the use of police disrespect. They found that persons with low self-control were significantly likely to experience disrespect at the hands of the police. Indeed, other than citizen-initiated disrespect toward the police, *low self-control was the strongest predictor of experiencing disrespect* and its effect size was two to three times greater than effect sizes of common correlates of crime such as age, sex, and income. Could offender low self-control be the common denominator in studies of citizen-police interactions? Bad attitudes, poor demeanor, and a negative presentation of self toward the police might collectively be driven by a higher-order construct: self-control. Indeed,

as the recent research by Mastrofski and his colleagues (2002) attested, low self-control might be *the* determinant of police behavior.

Self-control theory offers additional reasons for why certain persons are more likely to be arrested, and criminal justice researchers have begun to provide empirical support for this assertion. For example, DeLisi (2001a) found that defendants who lied to police by using aliases and other forms of deception were significantly likely to be arrested for an assortment of crimes, including violent, property, white-collar, and nuisance offenses. Furthermore, these offenders lied to police even though they had knowledge that their misinformation would be discovered upon fingerprinting, and would likely result in additional criminal charges. In a subsequent study, DeLisi (2001b) found that offenders with low self-control were significantly prone to noncompliance with criminal justice officials. For example, offenders with low self-control were significantly likely to miss court appearances, abscond, and escape. Thus, the impulsive, short-term desire to avoid police detection and skirt legal sanctions overrode the legal consequences for these violations.

The glib hedonism associated with low self-control likely increases opportunities to run afoul of the law (see Evans, Brown, & Killian, 2002; Fried & Reppucci, 2001). For example, whereas many people avoid going to bars during inclement weather, people with low self-control “brave the elements” and go out because the short-term desire is so intense. Similarly, it is well known that police increase their patrols on holidays such as New Year’s Eve. Knowing this, people generally refrain from drinking and driving particularly during times when the likelihood of detection is high. People with low self-control do not. For example, criminologists have found that persons with low self-control not only intended to commit alcohol-related crimes such as drunk driving (Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996), but also committed alcohol-related crimes and were significantly likely to binge drink (Piquero, Gibson, & Tibbetts, 2002).

Finally, temper is another important dimension of the self-control construct that likely relates to police contacts. Poorly tempered people are more quickly and easily aggrieved, take offense to slight affronts, and often use confrontation to handle disputes. As noted by scholars from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Goldstein, 1990; Luckenbill & Doyle, 1989; Walters, 1990), having a bad temper or general disputatiousness was a trait commonly found among criminal offenders. Indeed, DeLisi, Hochstetler, and Murphy (2003) found that temper was the

component of self-control that was most meaningful in explaining crime among a correctional sample. Thus, criminal defendants potentially worsen their criminal justice status because of limitations in their temperament. A recent study by Piquero, Gomez-Smith, and Langton (2004) elucidated how low self-control affected citizen responses to legal authority. Piquero and his colleagues (2004) found that persons with low self-control were significantly likely to perceive legal sanctions as unfair and their subsequent treatment as unjust. Moreover, persons with low self-control were significantly likely to respond angrily to their perceived legal persecution. This provides compelling evidence that as a global construct, low self-control portends negative, and at times, extremely negative, outcomes between citizens and the police.

When applied to policing, self-control raises several interesting and potentially important research questions. Does low self-control increase the likelihood of being detected, noticed, or contacted by the police? Does self-control predict arrest? If so, does self-control predict arrest independent of other known correlates of arrest such as demeanor, offense seriousness, and race? Are suspects with low self-control likely to deceive police to avoid detection? Do law enforcement officials respond more negatively to suspects who exhibit signs of low self-control? Are defendants with low self-control significantly likely to be arrested with force?

### Offender self-control and the courts

At a variety of points in the judicial process defendants can jeopardize their legal standing by failing to demonstrate self-control (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1980, pp. 99–143). During the booking process, criminal defendants are interviewed to obtain residency, employment, and criminal history information for bond setting and appropriateness for release. Some defendants forego this opportunity because of their uncooperative attitude, violent behavior, or intoxication level (Goldkamp, Gottfredson, Jones, & Weiland, 1995; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1980; Marsh, 2001). If defendants cannot be released on their own recognizance without a bond interview, being unable to control oneself can have important legal consequences. For example, notification that individual offenders were too out of control to be processed appears in bond narratives provided to the judge, prosecutor, and defense counsel. This, in effect, announces to all court personnel that a defendant was too ill-tempered to participate in a potentially advantageous interview and can have important effects on the subjective assessments of court officers (e.g., Bock &

Frazier, 1977; Bynum, 1982; Frazier & Bishop, 1985; Goldkamp et al., 1995; Ozanne, Wilson, & Gedney, 1980). This section uses self-control theory as a basis for evaluating subjective and objective decisions made by court personnel.

Offenders who remain in custody and wear stigmatizing jail clothing are frequently represented, in masse, with similar offenders. Undoubtedly, this sends messages about the defendant's likelihood of guilt, suitability for punishment, and degree of self-control. For example, Fenwick (1982) examined the role of legal and extra-legal variables in determining whether juvenile court officials filed charges upon intake and detained youth pending an adjudication hearing. Net of other important variables such as race, offense seriousness, delinquent record, and suspect demeanor, Fenwick (1982) found that family disaffiliation was the strongest determinant of juvenile court outcomes. Defined as the lack of integration among family members, Fenwick's work broached the causal mechanisms of self-control theory that viewed parental socialization as the inculcating force behind self-control (DeLisi, 2003; Hay, 2001). Fenwick's research demonstrated a two-pronged negative effect whereby low self-control and the family dysfunction that engendered it were on display for juvenile court officials.

Similarly, Leiber and Stairs (1999, p. 77) found that Black youths were subjected to greater social control and supervision than White youths because practitioners assumed that Blacks had more adverse family backgrounds and thus were less well equipped to avoid crime. Since parental socialization practices cause self-control or its absence in children (see Armstrong & Britt, 2004; Hay, 2001; Peterson-Lynskey, Winfree, Esbensen, & Clason, 2000), practitioners might assume *a priori* that groups with high levels of family discord were a greater risk and therefore not worth taking a chance when considering correctional supervision. Moreover, an understanding of how practitioners responded to low self-control among offenders could cast light on the contextual forms of bias often alluded to in the literature (e.g., Bishop & Frazier, 1996; Leiber & Jamieson, 1995; Munoz & Sapp, 2003).

Self-control theory also informs the objective decision-making of the courtroom workgroup, particularly if an offender's globally irresponsible lifestyle in the community precludes advantageous treatment once immersed in the criminal justice system (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 256). Once in court, a defendant's level of self-control and attendant criminal history can also dictate the plea offering made available. For example, Padgett (1985) reviewed the highly discretionary practice of plea-

bargaining and identified four types. Implicit plea-bargaining occurred when the defendant threw himself to the mercy of the court. Charge reduction plea-bargaining occurred where the prosecutor eliminated or reduced charges in exchange for a guilty plea. Judicial plea-bargaining occurred when the judge, after conferring with the prosecution and defense, offered the defendant a specific guilty plea sentence. Sentence recommendation plea-bargaining occurred when the prosecutor, who had already secured a guilty plea, made a sentencing recommendation to the judge who often complied with the recommendation. Padgett (1985) noted that career offenders, persons who were theoretically deficient in self-control, were most likely to face judicial pleas—the most severe form.<sup>6</sup>

Spanning the judicial process, self-control, as an analog of personality, attitude, and demeanor, was implicitly or explicitly linked to assorted court outcomes. For instance, Kellough and Wortley (2002) studied 1,800 cases in the Toronto courts and found that defendants who received a negative personality assessment from police were more likely to be detained during the pretrial phase. Using data from the Florida courts, Frazier, Bock, and Henretta (1980) found that arrestees who demonstrated good demeanor were 35 percent more likely to be released on their own recognizance and had lower bail than defendants with poorer demeanor. Everett and Nienstedt (1999) investigated the effect of defendant expressions of remorse on reductions in sentencing in federal courts and found that offender characteristics such as unemployment and criminal history, both implicated by self-control theory, reduced the likelihood of sentence reduction. In his study of teen court in Illinois, Rasmussen (2004) found that the court referral agents' judgments and the youth jury's assessments of the offender's character were central to sentencing outcomes.

Jurors also respond to the behavioral and temperament cues of criminal defendants, and one can imagine that a sullen defendant who embodies the negative characteristics of low self-control could lose subjective points. For example, Maynard and Manzo (1993) studied the dynamics of jury deliberation and found that jurors understood and applied the official criteria for determining the guilt of the defendant, however their intuitive, common sense understanding of justice was the overriding force in their decision making. In this sense, justice was an actively perceptual exercise. Hence, just as the constellation of negative traits associated with low self-control affected police behavior, it was probable that offender low self-control meaningfully influenced court behavior.

What perceptions are formed about defendants who do not present themselves well in court? If defendants with low self-control are unsympathetic, short-tempered hedonists, do they deserve punishment even in the face of mitigating factors? Studies of decision-making in criminal courts, and the criminal justice system generally, found that legal factors had more predictive power than extra-legal factors (Bock & Frazier, 1977; Bynum, 1982; Frazier & Bishop, 1985; Goldkamp et al., 1995; Hagan, Hewitt, & Alwin, 1979; Kakar, 2002; Potter & Kakar, 2002; Tracy, 2002; Wooldredge, 1998), however, a great deal of unexplained variation remained. Self-control theory could fill this void while raising some potentially important research questions. Does offender self-control predict negative outcomes when interacting with pretrial services personnel, defense counsel, prosecutors, judges, and jurors? If so, are defendants' problems compounded when criminal justice personnel themselves are characterized by varying tolerances for self-control?

Like all facets of criminal justice, the courts are overburdened, under-resourced, stressed, and expected to process ever-increasing numbers of criminal defendants. Moreover, court officials from intake to verdict vary in the degree with which they will tolerate various behaviors from criminal defendants. Court officials might invest less in individual cases that represent offenders with low self-control, such as pretrial service staff refusing to interview ill-tempered new arrestees, prosecutors withholding plea offers to defendants with whom they have a personality conflict, defense counsel perfunctorily meeting with clients who remain in custody, judges rendering decisions out of disgust with the lifestyle of the defendant, and jurors believing that the insensitive, hot-tempered, "thuggish" demeanor of criminal defendants is reason enough to convict them.

### **Offender self-control and corrections**

Self-control theory is particularly well suited to inform correctional research because criminal sanctions are essentially trials of responsibility that require employment, sobriety, and other features of conventional adult behavior. In effect, correctional treatment seeks to instill the very interpersonal skills and wherewithal that those with self-control presumably have. Unfortunately, these skills are often beyond the ken of many correctional clients. Researchers consistently found that many correctional clients were simply unable or unwilling to comply with the conditions of their sentences and the contingencies that these sentences produce. For instance, Gray, Fields, and

Maxwell (2001) studied 1,500 probationers and found that many violations of probation were “technical” in nature and occurred within ninety days of being sentenced. Specifically, 37 percent failed to report to their officer, 24 percent failed urinalysis tests, and 11 percent failed to pay fines or restitution. Similarly, several investigators (e.g., Anderson, Schumacker, & Anderson, 1991; Benda, 2003; Benda & Tollett, 1999; Benda, Toombs, & Peacock, 2003; De Li, Priu, & MacKenzie, 2000; Griffin & Armstrong, 2003; MacKenzie & De Li, 2002) examined the relationships between the local life circumstances of conventional offenders and recidivism. The results were consonant with self-control theory. Those who attached to family and work demonstrated sharp reductions in criminal offending. Those who remained criminally active were prone to use drugs, alcohol, and weapons. A modicum of self-control evidenced by involvement in conventional adult activities sharply reduced crime. This section reviews the general relevance of self-control theory to various sanctions within the criminal justice literature.

Increasingly, investigators are recognizing that offenders need substantive cognitive, lifestyle, and behavioral treatments to help them desist from crime. Changing the mindset of a criminal offender goes a long way toward his or her rehabilitation and self-control plays a major role. To illustrate, Pearson, Lipton, Cleland, and Yee (2002) analyzed data from the Correctional Drug Abuse Treatment Effectiveness (CDATE) project, a four-year meta-analysis of correctional treatment evaluation studies conducted between 1968 and 1996. Pearson and his colleagues (2002) found that standard behavior modification programs were not the best approach to reduce recidivism. Rather, programs that employed cognitive-behavioral and social skills interventions, such as increasing self-control among offenders, were most effective. In a separate meta-analysis, Dowden and Andrews (1999) found that self-control deficits were one of the most important treatment needs among female offenders and that self-control influenced other risk factors such as unemployment. Others had found that the elements of low self-control, such as impulsivity, having a bad temper, being action-oriented, and having an immediate time horizon, were important to social therapy among prisoners (Ortmann, 2000), recidivism among paroled drug offenders (O’Connell, 2003), recidivism among defendants on electronic monitoring (Payne & Gainey, 2004), and institutional violence among prison inmates (Wang & Diamond, 1999; Wormith, 1984).

Unfortunately, correcting the antisocial mindset of serious criminal offenders might be very difficult according to recent deterrence researchers. An array of studies produced daunting findings about the ability of punishment to reduce offending. For example, Piquero and Pogarsky (2002) examined the relationships between offending, impulsivity, an analog of low self-control, and personal and vicarious experiences with deterrence. They found that the worst offenders were “emboldened” by punishment experiences. In other words, involvement in the criminal justice system encouraged rather than deterred future criminal conduct. Similarly, Pogarsky (2002) found that the most impulsive and incorrigible individuals were oblivious to threats of punishment for criminal behavior and preferred prison to punishment alternatives. Using interview data from 1,000 Texas prisoners, Crouch (1993) found that older inmates with more extensive criminal histories including multiple commitments to prison preferred prison to probation. According to Crouch (1993, p. 84), “prison is also preferred by those who already are largely committed to a deviant lifestyle with its attendant trips to jail and prison. For persons deeply involved ‘in the life,’ prison carried only the inconvenience of the sentence, not the added loss of reputation...indeed, going to prison may even be a badge of honor for some offenders.” Rather than face the responsibilities inherent in conventional adult behavior, frequent offenders opted for the sedentary experience of prison where they could do their time with few strings attached. Even correctional personnel have been found to view the conditions of intermediate sanctions as too difficult for offenders to handle (Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994).

Across the corrections continuum, there is voluminous evidence that low self-control among criminal defendants jeopardizes their successful rehabilitation. Among probationers, clients who absconded or were revoked had worse stakes in conformity than probationers who successfully completed their sentences. Indeed, Mayzer, Gray, and Maxwell (2004) found that absconders and violators had less education, less stable employment, more dependents, and greater residential instability than their compliant peers. In a study of adjudicated delinquents who were released from confinement and later sentenced to adult prison, Benda, Corwyn, and Toombs (2001, pp. 608–609) found that youths with personality profiles that closely matched the characterized theorized by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) were among the most recidivistic offenders. Using data from a sample of adult males who were recently released from

prison, Hochstetler, Murphy, and Simons (2004) found that inmates with low self-control were significantly likely to experience depression, demonstrate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and experience maladjustment to confinement.

Indeed, low self-control has proven to be an imposing facilitator of recidivism. Benda (2003) conducted a five-year follow-up of more than six hundred male graduates of a boot camp and found that self-control was the strongest predictor of recidivism. Its effects exceeded those of many acknowledged correlates of crime, including delinquent peer associations, family attachments, abuse history, frustration and general strain, gang involvement, weapons violations, and drug history. Similarly, Evans et al. (2002) examined the post-release behavior of formerly institutionalized juvenile delinquents. Controlling for demographic, criminal history, and family variables, they found that youth possessing higher levels of decision-making competence scored highest on the post-detention success scale. Youths who avoided risky, impulsive decisions (qua self-control theory) also had stronger beliefs about their long-term ability to remain crime free.

Even the parole board meeting is rife with problems for the offender with low self-control. In addition to the objective factors that were required for release approval, parole board members also used subjective, intangible cues to evaluate inmates (Pogrebin, Poole, & Regoli, 1986). For example, Meyer (2001) used her eight-month experience on a parole panel to examine the decision-making processes involved in parole decisions. She found that board members employed “magic variables” to influence, positively or negatively, whether an inmate deserved parole. In Meyer’s words (2001, p. 58), “magic variables can also be invoked by decision-makers to acquit themselves of blame for their gut-level judgments...many magic variables include those which are difficult to objectively measure such as changes in an offender’s overall attitude or adequacy of the applicant’s parole plan.” Ruback and Hopper (1986) similarly found that the subjective behavior of parole applicants could deleteriously affect inmate’s chance for release. A poor showing of interpersonal self-control could negatively affect the judgment of criminal justice agents.

In sum, low self-control, among other problems, creates a recursive correctional problem for criminal defendants. Many offenders lack the skills and social support to successfully comply with sanctions that stress work commitment, sobriety, and compliance. More serious offenders tend to view community corrections

with considerable derision and find the demands of probation and other sanctions unrealistic. Concomitantly, recent deterrence research had indicated that hardened criminals were unfazed and undeterred by the criminal justice system and viewed prison as a normal and relatively uneventful stop along a criminal career. Indeed, the preference for prison and the normalization of the prison experience has become common in communities characterized by high crime rates (Anderson, 2003).

The relationship of self-control theory to these concepts has been virtually ignored and provides exciting opportunities for future research. Many criminologists found that impulsive offenders who did not assume the responsibilities of conventional adult life (e.g., employment) were most at-risk for recidivating. Were these simply manifestations of low self-control? Could cognitive-behavioral programs and other substantive treatment efforts be viewed as attempts to re-socialize offenders and inculcate self-control? If Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) were correct in their assumption that self-control is an enduring and stable characteristic, is rehabilitation possible? Are serious criminal offenders so deficient in self-control that a preference for prison represents their refusal or inability to consider its long-term consequences on their development? Do the negative character traits of offender with low self-control increase the likelihood that correctional personnel will violate their sentences?

## Discussion and conclusion

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) offered low self-control as the quintessential variable to explain crime and analogous behavior and dozens of tests produced empirical support. The applicability of self-control to criminal justice outcomes is largely unknown. Potentially, self-control theory has much to offer criminal justice research because it can provide the theoretical unification called for by Bernard and Engel (2001). This has important implications for research. Self-control theory may provide a linkage between the discretionary behavior of police, court officers, and correctional staff. Persons with low self-control are short-tempered and generally unlikable, and it is possible that practitioners across criminal justice agencies are generally responding to this disagreeable, negative trait. This might explain continuity in criminal justice experiences for various types of offenders. For example, offenders with exceedingly low self-control might consistently antagonize police, court officers, and correctional staff. Self-control could also explain discontinuity across the

various components of the criminal justice system. For example, offenders are often at their most uncooperative and intoxicated condition upon arrest and are likely to appear out of control to police. To their advantage, time allows the offender to sober upon entering court where their demeanor is often demonstratively better. A disconnect between police and court perceptions could explain why many cases are dismissed or not filed by prosecutors. The source of that disconnect could be the level of offender self-control being demonstrated.

Additionally, self-control theory can potentially link heretofore-disparate criminological literatures. Citizen demeanor and police response, community ties and bail, recidivism and noncompliance, criminal lifestyle, and a preference for prison share a common thread: the individual-level deficiencies of conventional criminal offenders. Nettler (1979, p. 28) once wrote that justice is a concept whose referents move with the morality that underwrites its conception. Perhaps the revolving door of the criminal justice system is driven by low self-control.

To conclude, a powerful indication of self-control theory's relevance to criminal justice can be found in the treatment and prevention literature. Recently, Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie (2000) conducted a meta-analysis that examined the recidivism outcomes of thirty-three corrections-based treatment programs. They concluded that self-control theory was a promising area of future research since many of the failures that offenders experienced appeared to be borne from stable, individual flaws like low self-control (see Wilson et al., 2000, p. 363). Indeed, programs are designed to promote prosocial and vocational skills and help offenders achieve sobriety. Success is defined by all of those things that self-control theory asserts that criminals cannot accomplish. Success and low self-control are therefore antithetical, thus it is likely that low self-control, the anti-matter of rehabilitation and compliance, is related to criminal justice.

## Notes

1. Prior scholars also noted the generally atheoretical structure of criminal justice. For example, Willis (1983) surveyed twenty-five criminal justice textbooks published between 1975 and 1980 and found that theoretical ideas or frameworks constituted just 5 percent of the published space. From this, Willis concluded that criminal justice was an area characterized by a wealth of facts but dearth of theory.

2. The current theoretical framework used the conventional or street criminal as its frame of reference, primarily because conventional criminals (as opposed to "war criminals," "corporate criminals," or "organized criminals") were the modal offender involved in the criminal justice system. A frequent criticism of self-control theory

was that its central construct had limited explanatory power for deviant behavior among elites (see Simpson & Piquero, 2002). Admittedly, the same limitation existed here because of the focus on conventional criminals.

3. Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) eschewed viewing low self-control as a personality trait, others had not. Indeed, scholars linked low self-control to psychopathy (Wiebe, 2003), an array of individual-level pathologies (DeLisi, 2003), and conscientiousness, behavioral activation systems, and behavioral inhibition systems (O'Gorman & Baxter, 2002). The core characteristics of Gottfredson and Hirschi's conceptualization of low self-control were also similar to other psychological constructs that related to criminal and analogously deviant behavior. These included effortful control (e.g., Rothbart, Ellis, Rueda, & Posner, 2003), locus of control and blame attribution (e.g., Gudjonsson, 1984), and irresponsibility (Walters, 1990; White & Walters, 1989).

4. The recurrent findings in the self-control literature were akin to the central postulate of Walters' (1990) criminal lifestyle theory, which asserted that global irresponsibility, self-indulgence, an intrusive approach to personal relationships, and chronic violation of societal rules, laws, and mores characterized the lives and habits of serious offenders (see Walters, 1991, 2003; Walters & Chlumsky, 1993; Walters & McDonough, 1998). According to Walters (1990, p. 70), the criminal was "irresponsible in his attitude toward school, work, finances, family, and friends. Moreover, this irresponsibility in attitude culminates in a habitual epitome of conduct in which the criminal fails to account for his actions and regularly neglects his social and moral obligations to others. This irresponsibility is global and persistent... and is a constant source of irritation to those most affected by the criminal's undependability, namely parents, spouses, teachers, and employers. It is his reckless, impulsive, unreliable approach to situations that serves to make the criminal's life so chaotic, unpredictable, and tumultuous." Thus, the personality traits of criminal offenders were consonant with the behavioral manifestations of low self-control.

5. Despite the empirical success of self-control theory, not everyone viewed the theory positively. The central concern from critics was that the theory was tautological or that low self-control and its products were essentially the same. Readers interested in the tautology criticism and the measurement issues related to it can consult a sizable literature (Akers, 1991; Cochran, Wood, Sellers, Wilkerson, & Chamlin, 1998; DeLisi et al., 2003; Grasmick et al., 1993; Higgins, 2004, 2005; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1994; Marcus, 2003; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003).

6. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) theorized that self-control was the indispensable individual-level predictor of crime. Theoretically, one can speculate that the worst offenders will also be those with the lowest levels of self-control. This remains an open empirical question.

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