

Implications of Control Theory for Crime Policy and Prevention

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Starting Point

- The National Academy of Sciences report on criminal careers that was published in the 1980s
 - Atheoretical
 - Data-driven approach to locating correlates of crime
- Extensive data on risk and protective factors that have accumulated over the past 20 to 30 years
- Increasing use of Large (sometimes Big) Data to analyze crime patterns

Why Bother with Theory?

- Accumulation of facts does not tell us why – we're left with a “Black Box”
- Theory gives us a tool for explaining *why*
- Sampson et al. (2013) note that program evaluations can tell us what worked, but not will it work in some other set of circumstances
- Three considerations:
 - What is the causal mechanism? (See, also, Hirschi and Selvin 1995 [1967]; Lieberson, 1985)
 - Are the treatment effects homogeneous or heterogeneous?
 - Are the findings dependent on context?

Why Control Theory?

- Tends to be more consistent with the accumulated knowledge on risk and protective factors noted above
- Dominant approach in the field – most other theories have accommodated elements of the theory
- Travis is one of this year's winners of the Stockholm Prize

Sketch of Control Theory

- Key assumptions:
 - Individual
 - Societal
- Sources of control
 - Internal
 - External
 - Internal and External
- Formal v. Informal

Linking Control Theory to Policy

- Controlling Criminals v. Controlling Crime Events
- Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1995) Eight Rules:
 - 1 Do not attempt to control crime by incapacitating adults
 - 2 Do not attempt to control crime by rehabilitating adults
 - 3 Do not attempt to control crime by altering the severity of penalties available to the criminal justice system
 - 4 Restrict the unsupervised activities of teenagers
 - 5 Limit proactive policing
 - 6 Question the characterization of crime offered by agents of the criminal justice system and uncritically repeated by the media
 - 7 Support programs designed to provide early education and effective child care
 - 8 Support policies that promote and facilitate two-parent families and that increase the number of caregivers relative to the number of children

Program Evaluations

- Programs focused on increasing self-control among children and youth
- Programs aimed at educating parents and improving parenting skills
- Programs aimed at fostering positive peer relationships
- Increased sensitivity to treatment heterogeneity, especially effects of biosocial links

An Extended Case Study: Gun Violence in the US

- Number of guns in the US is estimated to be 300 to 350 million – nearly one per person
- Constitutional protections and political context
- All points to there will be widely prevalent gun ownership and hypothetically, ubiquitous opportunities for gun crime and violence

Typical Calls for Addressing Gun Violence

- Tougher penalties for persons convicted of gun crimes (e.g., 2 or 5-year additions to a prison term)
- Banning specific types of firearms
- Universal registration of firearms
- Universal background checks on individuals at the time of purchase

Does it Make Any Difference?

- Not really. . .
 - Substantial body of research that has shown over and over again that tougher penalties don't affect crime – why would we expect it to here?
 - For those short periods of time when certain weapons have been banned in some US cities (e.g., Chicago) or nationally (e.g., “assault” style weapons), there was little impact on homicide rates
 - Washington, DC, had a universal registration law in place for several decades that similarly showed no effect on homicides
 - Background checks tend not to affect the purchase of contraband guns – those stolen and sold or passed along later – None of the recent mass shootings in the US, for example, would have been prevented by background checks

Why No Effects?

- Consider the nature of crime and criminals – key to control theory
- Criminals are generalists – Laws that target gun crimes assume that there is something unique about the crime or criminal, which is simply not the case
- Individuals convicted of gun crimes in the US look very much like all sorts of other criminals
- Gun violence is distributed – socially, spatially, temporally – in the same sorts of ways that other forms of crime and violence are distributed: Concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods with very little demographic variation

Age Distribution of All Homicides by Race and Sex, 1999-2014

Age Distribution of All Firearm Homicides by Race and Sex, 1999-2014

Age Distribution of All Non-Firearm Homicides by Race and Sex, 1999-2014

Age Distribution of Firearm and Non-Firearm Homicides for White Males, 1999-2014

Age Distribution of Firearm and Non-Firearm Homicides for Black Males, 1999-2014

Any Good News that Control Theory Might Offer?

- Consider automobiles – another great American love affair
- Auto fatalities have been declining in recent years as more and more cars have air bags as a standard safety feature – why this matters is that people can be as reckless as they might want, and may still survive a serious accident, simply because they're driving a car with air bags – In years past, the same person likely would have been killed
 - Point is a preventive mechanism was put in place that cut down on the opportunity for fatal accidents
 - It will be decades before nearly all cars on the road are so equipped, but there is every expectation the trend will continue
- In regard to gun violence:
 - “Smart gun” technology has the potential to function much like air bags have in auto accidents
 - Prevention of gun violence should follow the same approach that we use for all other forms of crime prevention – prevention of crime generally will be prevention of gun crime specifically