



Self-Control and Crime Over the Life Course

Carter Hay // Ryan Meldrum



SELF-CONTROL AND CRIME OVER THE LIFE COURSE



Florida International University



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston

FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Jerry Westby
Editorial Assistant: Laura Kirkhuff
Production Editor: Kelly DeRosa
Copy Editor: Rachel Keith
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Dennis W. Webb
Indexer: Marilyn Anderson
Cover Designer: Scott Van Atta
Marketing Manager: Terra Schultz

Copyright © 2016 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this title from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4833-5899-4

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



15 16 17 18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SELF-CONTROL AND
CRIME OVER THE LIFE COURSE



SAGE was founded in 1965 by Sara Miller McCune to support the dissemination of usable knowledge by publishing innovative and high-quality research and teaching content. Today, we publish more than 750 journals, including those of more than 300 learned societies, more than 800 new books per year, and a growing range of library products including archives, data, case studies, reports, conference highlights, and video. SAGE remains majority-owned by our founder, and after Sara's lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures our continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | Washington DC | New Delhi | Singapore | Boston

PREFACE

A compelling conclusion has emerged in the behavioral sciences: Self-control—an individual quality we all possess in varying degrees—is a remarkably powerful predictor of how our life will unfold. This one simple attribute touches nearly all aspects of life, affecting how we approach the world and how it treats us. These dynamics first emerge in early childhood, and by adolescence and adulthood our self-control is affecting such pivotal things as whether we break the law, how we do in school, and whether we succeed in an occupation and develop rewarding interpersonal relationships. Indeed, our self-control also affects our ability to avoid life's great hassles, including addiction, bankruptcy, poor physical health, and even criminal victimization. These events and developments all rely, at least in part, on our ability to thoughtfully assess daily risks and temptations and then behave in ways that restrain impulses and advance long-term interests. For those who do this well, life often proceeds quite smoothly; for those who do not, the complications may be frequent and severe.

These conclusions follow from countless behavioral science studies spanning many decades. Our approach to that research has been from the perspective of criminology, our “home” discipline. Criminologists have studied self-control extensively since 1990, the year that saw the publication of Gottfredson and Hirschi's seminal work *A General Theory of Crime*. That book argued that self-control was *the* singular factor most responsible for explaining criminal involvement. Gottfredson and Hirschi's work triggered a seemingly limitless supply of articles, books, and chapters on self-control. This was all for good reason—just as Gottfredson and Hirschi predicted, effects of low self-control on crime turned out to be quite powerful. Moreover,

criminologists have been fascinated by its equally powerful effects on many of the family, peer, and school variables that *also* affect crime. As these impressive results piled up, the concept of self-control took on momentum, visibility, and a larger-than-life presence in criminological theory. This prompted one fellow self-control researcher to cleverly dub self-control the “*Tyrannosaurus rex* of criminology” (DeLisi, 2011, p. 103).

As we all know, however, things did not end well for the dinosaur version of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and there were problems for its criminological counterpart also. That is where this book comes in. It first was envisioned many years ago when we recognized problems in the criminological approach to self-control—problems that undermined its future insights and usefulness. Admittedly, these were not *cataclysmic* problems—nothing like the giant asteroid that struck the Earth and triggered atmospheric shifts that left dinosaurs extinct. They were, however, problems nonetheless. Three in particular most captured our attention and inspired our search for solutions.

The first involved how the *extraordinary volume* of new self-control research had overwhelmed prevailing theory in this area. Theory is supposed to organize what is known about something and then guide future research, but in this instance, that was not happening. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory was published 25 years ago and has not been updated since. Moreover, their theory was—by design—an unusually parsimonious and concise approach; for example, it cited only a single cause of individual self-control (exposure to high-quality parenting) and offered few details on how low self-control functions with other facets of life to affect behavior. By the late 1990s, research was zooming past the theory’s predictions to consider issues it had neglected or not envisioned. Indeed, in many instances, researchers were testing hypotheses that Gottfredson and Hirschi had flatly rejected, especially in reference to the biological basis of self-control and the idea that self-control is dynamic over the life course. Regarding these issues and others, Gottfredson and Hirschi had in some sense told future researchers “don’t go there.” Many criminologists were woe-fully bad at following those instructions—they *did* go *there*. When they did, new empirical findings piled up faster and faster. And yet, the theoretical framework for organizing those findings remained

unchanged and could not incorporate the new insights. In the world of science, this is a big problem.

There was a second problem (although there are terrific exceptions to it that we discuss): Criminologists often proceeded as if we were the only behavioral science studying self-control. This could not have been further from the truth. The explosion in self-control research over the past two decades knows no academic boundaries—it spans a diverse list of disciplines beyond criminology, including psychology, sociology, economics, behavioral genetics, cognitive neuroscience, and psychiatry. And importantly, just as criminologists often ignored the research in these disciplines, those disciplines ignored our research in criminology. Every school of thought—sometimes even those existing within the same discipline—seemed to proceed as if others barely existed. The end result is that too much self-control research is fragmented, narrow, and discipline-specific; the hard-earned insights emerging from any one perspective largely have not been incorporated into other perspectives.

The third problem inspiring this book relates to the issue of public policy. The overwhelming majority of self-control research—across all the disciplines—approached self-control as a variable that could explain individual differences in criminal, deviant, and harmful behaviors. Very rarely did researchers take the next step of asking (and empirically verifying) how we could use this information to inform policy efforts to reduce these behaviors. And yet, fruitful opportunities clearly are possible on this issue. Given the powerful way in which self-control shapes behavior, along with society's obvious interest in reducing the suffering from harmful manifestations of low self-control, we can reach but one conclusion: Self-control theory and research *can* attend to key issues of public policy, and this should be done with depth and precision.

There certainly were other problems, but these are the three that stood out to us: Empirical research was zooming ahead of prevailing theory, researchers were using narrow discipline-specific perspectives, and along the way, nobody was talking much about policy. With these limitations clear in our minds, we embarked on the writing of this book. Our goal was to use its chapters to answer questions that are fundamental to understanding the connection between self-control and behavior. These are the questions we sought to answer:

- Over the life course and across different arenas of life, what behaviors are significantly affected by self-control?
- What causes a person to have high or low self-control to begin with?
- Once a child or adolescent develops a certain level of self-control, does that level of self-control remain fixed or does it fluctuate over the life course? And if self-control fluctuates over time, what specific events and experiences drive this?
- When self-control affects crime, *why* does it do so—what exactly is the causal sequence by which low self-control is translated into actual criminal acts?
- Are the effects of self-control uniform across different individuals and environments, or, alternatively, do the harmful effects of low self-control depend on other factors?

We knew that extensive rigorous research had been conducted on each of these questions, but there was no mechanism or framework for bringing it all together. Our goal therefore was to write the book that would do so. And true to our beliefs about the scholarly limitations we described above, our approach would be built on three major priorities: (a) to incorporate the new insights and innovations that have accumulated in recent research, (b) to build an integrated perspective that truly captures the multidisciplinary nature of modern-day self-control research, and (c) to place public policy issues at the forefront. Regarding the last, a key principle guided us: Self-control research is much more than fanciful ideas that are interesting to college professors and their students; instead, it can be the basis for refined policy efforts that combat pressing problems faced by individuals, communities, and governments.

The chapters that follow are the end product of these efforts. The book is designed to provide an engaging and entertaining view on the science of self-control. Most important, we wanted it to be accessible and informative to a wide swath of readers, ranging from students taking their first course in the behavioral sciences to graduate students and scholars conducting their own self-control research. Writing for such a broad audience was a novel experience in that we have spent our careers writing dense, technical journal articles read mostly by

professional researchers. Reversing course and writing for a broad audience that includes nonspecialists, however, was a refreshing, enlightening, and elevating experience. It prompted us to keep an eye on the big picture, rise above the minutiae of conflicting arguments and findings, and ask ourselves (a) what the important things that we suspect or know are, (b) why these things are important, and (c) how they connect to people's real lives. True enough, we will cover rigorous issues of research and theory throughout, but this is done with a clear, conversational approach to writing that emphasizes the interesting aspects of the material.

Ultimately, we think readers will discover the same thing we did: When it comes to self-control and behavior, there is much out there to learn, and it is often fascinating. The range of topics we cover is remarkable: There are the small children in a lab trying their hardest *not* to eat a marshmallow (and the researchers who followed up decades later to see how they fared in life); there is the Russian explorer on an Antarctic expedition who, in a weakened state, mustered the self-control to cut open his own abdomen and perform a life-saving appendectomy on himself; there is Phineas Gage, the 1800s-era railroad worker whose brain was pierced by an expelled railroad spike (he survived but was plagued by self-control lapses that have modern-day neuroscientists still studying his brain injuries); there are stories of self-control transformations, where individuals previously marked by major self-control deficits turned around their lives and pursued a new course. And then there is the possibility that collective advances in self-control have fueled the advancement of human civilizations. That argument comes from Steven Pinker, an acclaimed Harvard psychologist. He provides a scrupulously researched narrative on a multiple-centuries-long "civilizing process" in which human societies became attentive to how a collective sense of self-control could shape their futures, allowing them to more efficiently and peacefully navigate the inherent challenges of life. One thing is for certain: In studying these topics and others, we learned an extraordinary amount ourselves. We look forward to sharing that knowledge with readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For any book, the authors owe a debt of gratitude to a wide array of helpful individuals, and this certainly is true for us. The ideas and arguments we present here were a long time in forming, and their origins can be traced to countless interactions we have had on the topic of self-control and criminological theory with valued coauthors and mentors who work in this area. Over the years, we have read one another's work, conducted studies together, fired emails to one another across the country, and batted ideas back and forth at the annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology. We are indebted to too many such people to list them all here, but we want to especially acknowledge Charles Tittle, Mark Stafford, Jim Short, Walter Forrest, Alex Piquero, Jacob Young, J. C. Barnes, and Frank Weerman.

Many thanks also go to the SAGE staff for their patience and expert assistance throughout. Chris Gill heard the first pitch for this book several years ago; that pitch was far from compelling, but he kept it on his radar screen and helped it ultimately get noticed. Also, Jerry Westby has been terrific in expertly marshalling the book through this process, and Laura Kirkhuff, Kelly DeRosa, and Rachel Keith helped greatly in the production and editing stage. We are thankful also to the reviewers of earlier drafts of the book for their helpful comments and suggestions:

J. C. Barnes, *University of Cincinnati*

Michael P. Polakowski, *University of Arizona*

Brie Diamond, *Texas Christian University*

Jennifer Wareham, *Wayne State University*

Rebecca S. Katz, *Morehead State University*

Paul Becker, *University of Dayton*

Nadine M. Connell, *University of Texas, Dallas*

J. Mitchell Miller, *University of North Florida*

Curtis R. Blakely, *Truman State University*

A special thanks also goes to Samantha Ladwig, a doctoral student at Florida State University, for her impressive research that contributed to many sections of the book. And many thanks go to colleagues, students, and Dean Tom Blomberg at Florida State University in Tallahassee for their support for and interest in our efforts, along with thanks to Lisa Stolzenberg and Jamie Flexon at Florida International University in Miami.

And last, I (Carter) wish to especially thank my wife Jennifer and our two children. They have heard countless tellings and retellings of the stories and study descriptions that follow. They have been eager and supportive all along. Most important, when it was time to step away from the book, at least momentarily, they always provided the needed distractions, entertainment, and companionship.

BRIEF CONTENTS



Preface	x
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Introduction	1
2. Theories of Self-Control and Behavior	19
3. What Are the Consequences of Low Self-Control?	49
4. Infancy and Childhood: What Are the Causes of Self-Control Early in Life?	77
5. Adolescence and Adulthood: Is Self-Control Stable Over Time?	111
6. What Leads to Self-Control Change?	142
7. Do the Harmful Effects of Low Self-Control Vary Across Different Circumstances?	179
8. Self-Control and Crime Over the Life Course: Bringing It All Together	209
9. Self-Control and Crime: Influencing Policy and Looking to the Future	239
References	259
Index	283
About the Authors	296

DETAILED CONTENTS



Preface	x
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Introduction	1
A Definition of Self-Control	5
An Integrative Approach	7
A Life Course Approach	9
Connecting Self-Control to Other Causes of Behavior	11
Attention to Public Policy	13
Connecting the Science of Self-Control to the Stories We Read About Every Day	15
Conclusion	16
Discussion Questions	17
2. Theories of Self-Control and Behavior	19
The Inextricable Connection Between Theory and Fact	22
Explaining Crime: Gottfredson and Hirschi's Self-Control Theory	23
Evaluating Gottfredson and Hirschi's Self-Control Theory	28
A Psychological, Trait-Based Theory of Self-Control	31
Biosocial Approaches to Behavior	35
The Strength Model: Self-Control as a Depletable Resource	41
Conclusion	46
Discussion Questions	47
3. What Are the Consequences of Low Self-Control?	49
The Marshmallow Experiments	51
A Quick Note on the Measurement of Self-Control	54
Research on Low Self-Control and Crime	58

The Everyday Consequences of Low Self-Control	61
<i>Low Self-Control and Criminal Victimization</i>	61
<i>Low Self-Control, Academic Achievement, and Financial Success</i>	63
<i>Low Self-Control and Interpersonal Relationships</i>	65
<i>Low Self-Control, Health, and Well-Being</i>	67
Policy Implications and Possibilities	69
Conclusion	75
Discussion Questions	76
4. Infancy and Childhood: What Are the Causes of Self-Control Early in Life?	77
The Role of Parents in Shaping Self-Control	80
<i>Research With Very Young Children</i>	84
<i>Parent Effects, Child Effects, and Reciprocity</i>	89
<i>The Intergenerational Transmission of Self-Control</i>	92
<i>Summary on Parenting and Self-Control</i>	94
The Genetic Underpinnings of Self-Control	95
<i>The Role of Specific Genes, Gene × Environment Interactions</i>	99
Neurobiological Influences on Self-Control	100
Policy Implications and Possibilities	103
Conclusion	109
Discussion Questions	110
5. Adolescence and Adulthood: Is Self-Control Stable Over Time?	111
Stability and Change in Self-Control	113
Why Does Self-Control Often Remain Stable?	119
Persistent Individual Traits as Contributors to Self-Control Stability	121
Persistent Environmental Characteristics: Parenting and Peers	123
Persistent Environmental Characteristics: The Stability of Poverty	125
State Dependence as a Contributor to Self-Control Stability	127
An Implicit Idea: Human Agency	130
Empirical Evidence on Explanations for Stability	135
Policy Implications and Possibilities	137

Conclusion	139
Discussion Questions	140
6. What Leads to Self-Control Change?	142
The Pervasiveness of Change	144
The Transformations of Adolescence	146
<i>The Adolescent Maturity Gap</i>	148
<i>The Neuroscience of the Evolving Adolescent Brain</i>	150
<i>The Varied Experience of Adolescence</i>	153
Unexpected Shifts in Social	
Environments and Relationships	155
<i>Unexpected Changes With Parents</i>	158
<i>Unexpected Peer Associations</i>	159
<i>Unexpected Developments at School</i>	160
<i>Changes Associated With Marriage</i>	162
<i>Employment as a Turning Point</i>	165
<i>Discovering (or Rediscovering) Religion</i>	166
<i>Human Agency Revisited</i>	167
Sleeping, Eating, and Substance	
Use: Short-Term Fluctuations in Self-Control	169
Policy Implications and Possibilities	172
Conclusion	175
Discussion Questions	176
7. Do the Harmful Effects of Low	
 Self-Control Vary Across Different Circumstances?	179
Conditional Causation and Low	
Self-Control: Conceptual Issues	181
Criminal Opportunity	184
Association With Delinquent Peers	187
Social Bonds	189
Neighborhood Disadvantage	189
Weak Moral Values	191
Considering Self-Control as a Moderator Variable	195
Can Self-Control Moderate the Effects of Self-Control?	199
Policy Implications and Possibilities	201
Conclusion	205
Discussion Questions	206
8. Self-Control and Crime Over	
 the Life Course: Bringing It All Together	209
The Causes of Initial Self-Control	
Differences in the First Decade of Life	211

<i>The Prenatal Period and Infancy</i>	211
<i>The Toddler Years and Early Childhood</i>	214
<i>Diagramming These Arguments</i>	216
The Child Grows Into an Adolescent	218
<i>The Link Between Childhood</i>	
<i>and Adolescent Self-Control</i>	218
<i>The Process for Self-Control Change</i>	221
The Adolescent Grows Into an Adult	225
<i>Extending the Model Later Into Adulthood</i>	229
Moderated Effects Across the Entire Life Course	230
<i>Moderated Effects and “Strong” Environments</i>	231
<i>Interactive Relationships Between</i>	
<i>State and Trait Self-Control</i>	233
Conclusion	234
Discussion Questions	237
9. Self-Control and Crime: Influencing	
Policy and Looking to the Future	239
Self-Control as a Driver of Societal Advance	240
Using Policy to Promote Self-Control Over the Life Course	242
<i>The Prenatal Period</i>	243
<i>The Toddler and Childhood Years</i>	245
<i>Adolescence</i>	246
<i>Adulthood</i>	248
Community-Based Programs	
Relevant to All Stages of the Life Course	250
Evidence of Program Success	251
Concluding Thoughts	254
Discussion Questions	258
References	259
Index	283
About the Authors	296