

Testing Some Aspects of Control Theory With Female Delinquents and Non-Delinquents

Female delinquency varies with the strength of the social bond as measured by attachment to school and commitment to education, a recent Swedish study found. However, the relationship between delinquency and social bond is not strong enough to allow accurate prediction of future delinquency or to "explain" differences in the delinquency of various groups of individuals.

Despite the limitation of this relationship, risk of becoming delinquent was found to decrease as the level of social bonding increased. This finding supports social control theory which holds that the absence of bonds to conventional society, such as attachment to others or commitment to school, allows an individual to deviate.

Data for this study were part of Project Metropolitan, a major Swedish longitudinal study of all boys and girls born in 1953, regardless of where they were born as long as they lived in the Stockholm area on 1 November 1963. Information was collected from birth to age 30, mainly through records but also through surveys, on 15,117 individuals.

A number of past and current studies have used data from Project Metropolitan.

Information on delinquency, crime and drug use, as well as structural background and social bond aspects, was based on official records.

Of the 7,398 females in the original sample, 791(10.8%) had criminal, delinquency or drug records.

For this study, females were divided into four categories according to the seriousness of delinquent behaviour. The first was the non-delinquent, control group (n=6,607). These females had no record of delinquency, crime or drug use.

The second group consisted of females handled by the Child Welfare Committees because of delinquent but not criminal behaviour, such as truancy, running away and occasional mild drug use (n=218). This was the DEL1 group.

Third were females with either police-recorded crimes or more serious and frequent drug use (n=506). This was the DEL2 group.

The fourth, and smallest, category, DEL3 included females with both criminal records and records of hard drug use (n=67).

The study concentrated on two factors that had previously been established as indicators of conventional bonding: attachment to school, which deals primarily with the immediate school situation (interests, attitudes and behaviours), and commitment to education, which focuses on educational plans for the future.

Several items in the study measured the degree of attachment to school. Delinquents tended to have lower scores on attachment, no matter which group they were in.

The DEL3 group, assumed to contain the most serious delinquents, included the highest proportion (28%) who said that they spent from no time at all to less than half an hour a day doing homework. This compares with less than 10% of non-delinquents.

Another item measured attitudes to smoking in school. Two to three times as many delinquents as non-delinquents thought that pupils ought to be allowed to smoke in school (17% to 26% versus 9%).

Similarly, 23% to 35% of individuals from the three delinquent subgroups found all or almost all school subjects boring, compared to 13% of the control group.

Not surprisingly, delinquents reported higher rates of truancy. About 40% of the most serious delinquents (DEL3), compared to about 25% of the non-delinquents, said they had been truant some times. As well, a higher proportion of the delinquents said they frequently missed school.

More delinquents than non-delinquents reported having been sent out of class for misbehaviour (almost half of the DEL1 and DEL3 subgroups, compared to less than a third of the non-delinquents). The DEL1 individuals also reported being frequently sent from class almost twice as often as the other, presumably more serious, delinquent groups and about three times as often as non-delinquents.

The study also found that delinquents had a lower commitment than the control group to the second factor, education.

This is clearly illustrated by the actual applications for secondary school. Only 16% of DEL3 girls, compared with almost 66% of non-delinquents, ever applied.

At one point, subjects were asked whether they intended to later apply for admission to secondary school. Although only 25% of the DEL3 group said no, in the end, a far greater number, 83.6%, actually did not apply. In comparison, about 11% of non-delinquents said they did not intend to apply to secondary school, and just over 33% ended up not applying.

The majority (81%) of non-delinquents who entered secondary school completed it. Most delinquents also completed secondary school, although the proportion was smaller than for the non-delinquents (61% of the DEL1 and DEL2 categories, and 80% of the DEL3 group).

There were telling responses to the question "If school was completely voluntary and you could quit tomorrow or stay if you wanted to, what would you do if you had to decide all by yourself?" The delinquent girls were less committed than the non-delinquents: among the DEL3 girls, about 36% said they would leave "at once" or "after this grade." This compares to 27% and 21% of the DEL1 and DEL2 girls, and only 12% of the non-delinquents who said they would leave.

As to school marks, approximately 33% of the DEL3 girls, compared to 23% of the DEL1, 17% of the DEL2 and 8% of the control group, did not get a final certificate of elementary school.

In a similar vein, the average marks in grade nine of more than 40% of the DEL3 group were in the

lowest range. In fact, it appears that the marks of the DEL3 girls got progressively worse: in grade six, only 16% of girls in this category had marks in the lowest range. Conversely, the grade nine marks of more than 40% of the non-delinquent control group were in the second highest range.

These results imply that low achievement in school is probably related to the strength of at least two aspects of the social bond: attachment to school and commitment to education.

The figures show that the most serious delinquents probably are the least committed, but also that those in the non-criminal category (the DEL1 group) deviate more extensively than those in the DEL2 group, who were thought to have more serious delinquency patterns.

In a further analysis, it was found that no more than 7% of differences between groups in levels of crime and delinquency could be accounted for by social bonding. This means that even with knowledge of individuals' levels of social bonding, the ability to predict future delinquency is limited.

Despite this, findings indicated that the risk of becoming delinquent varies with levels of social bonding and ability: for example, the risk of developing criminal behaviour and using drugs (the DEL3 category) was almost four times higher for those who skipped school frequently than for those who never were truant.

Marie Torstensson, "Female Delinquents in a Birth Cohort: Tests of Some Aspects of Control Theory," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 6, 1(1990): 101-115.