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A General Theory of Crime and Public Policy

In *A General Theory of Crime,* Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi (1990) argue that self-control is the principal cause of criminal and analogous activity over the life course. According to the theorists, self-control is formed via a three-pronged parental socialization process in the first decade of life that includes parental monitoring of offspring, parental recognition of deviant behavior, and appropriate parental punishment associated with deviant behavior. Once formed by age 10–12, self-control is believed to be relatively stable over the life course, impervious to change by external sources of social control. Moreover, the effect of self-control infiltrates other life domains, including work, employment, education, and relationships. Those with low self-control are expected to have a higher likelihood of engaging in crime and deviant behavior and to have little success in other life domains (i.e., poor jobs, low education, poor relationship quality, etc.).

Much has been written about the general theory of crime, and researchers have subjected the theory to theoretical and empirical research (see reviews in Goode 2007; Pratt and Cullen 2000). And while Gottfredson and Hirschi have described some of the public policy implications of their theory, such discussion has been relegated to difficult-to-find publications, which has likely resulted in there being little debate in the more general, mainstream literature about the implications of their theory for crime control. This is an unfortunate happenstance. Discussions of theory and policy must be closely intertwined, because good theory abounds with policy implications, and good policy is guided by sound theory.

After identifying the key postulates and summarizing the strength for each postulate emerging from related research on the general theory of crime, the

purpose of this chapter is to bring to the forefront a discussion about the public policy implications emanating from the general theory of crime generally, and from the key postulates in particular. The chapter closes with a reflection on the likelihood of achieving the specific policy implications, as well as their successful implementation.

Key Postulates in the General Theory of Crime

To be sure, Gottfredson and Hirschi constructed their theory largely in response to what they perceived the facts of crime to be. According to the theorists, the key facts are that (1) differences between high- and low-rate offenders persist over the life course; (2) efforts to treat or rehabilitate offenders do not produce the desired results; (3) intervention in childhood offers the greatest promise of success in crime reduction; (4) police and the more general criminal justice system have little effect on crime; (5) crimes may be prevented by increasing the effort required to commit them; (6) crime declines with age among all offenders and in almost all types of offending; (7) offenders do not specialize; (8) offenders have higher rate of accident, illness, and death than do non-offenders; (9) offenders are more likely than non-offenders to use drugs; (10) offenders are more frequently involved in non-criminal forms of deviance; (11) offenders are more weakly attached than non-offenders to restrictive institutions and long-term careers (families, schools, jobs); (12) offenders are disadvantaged with respect to intellectual and cognitive skills; and (13) family structure, family relations, and child-rearing practices are important predictors of deviant behavior because they operate through self-control (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001, 91).

From these facts, one can deduce the key postulates emerging from the general theory of crime. Before these postulates are reviewed, it is important to remind readers that Gottfredson and Hirschi came to their general theory (and their image of the offender) largely as a result of looking at the various crimes to determine what they had in common.[1] Their study of this indicated that crimes were all quick and easy ways to get what one wants, and in the long run they are all dangerous to one's health, safety, reputation, and economic well-being (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001, 82). With this image of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi's image of the offender is one where individuals differ in the likelihood that they will take the quick and easy way regardless of the long-term risks. This enduring difference between people is called self-control, or

[1] As Hirschi and Gottfredson (1995, 138) recollect, "When we first attempted to understand the correlates of delinquency from a theoretical point of view, we decided that versatility was the primary or central issue, that our first task was to understand the source of versatility, to find what seemingly diverse behaviors have in common that accounts for their tendency to appear together in the behavioral repertoires of individuals."

the tendency to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed their immediate or short-term benefits. Thus, the theorists contend that they need to be able to distinguish between crime and criminality (i.e., need something that changes with age—crime, but something that does not, criminality, or the tendency of people to engage in or refrain from criminal acts).

As originally described by the theorists, three critical interrelated postulates are associated with the general theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 253): (1) the age postulate (where composite measures of crime follow a predictable path over the life course, rising to a peak in late adolescence and declining sharply thereafter throughout life); (2) the stability postulate (where composite measures of crime are highly stable over time—people who have a high degree of criminality at one time will tend to have a high degree of criminality later in life); and (3) the versatility postulate (where indicators of crime, deviance, and analogous acts are consistently positively correlated among themselves).

The first postulate is the invariance of the age–crime relation (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983). The distribution of age with respect to crime and delinquency is such that it increases throughout early to mid-adolescence, peaks in late adolescence, and then begins a precipitous decline throughout early adulthood. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, 124), "The shape or form of the distribution has remained virtually unchanged for about 150 years," leading them to conclude that "the age effect is everywhere and at all times the same." The theorists also extend the age postulate to include acts that are equivalent to crime, including prison infractions, motor-vehicle accidents, and the like.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, 254) contend that because the causes of crime do not vary by age, they may be studied at any age. Perhaps there is no better or stronger statement of the age postulate than the following: "The empirical fact of a decline in the crime rate with age is beyond dispute" (131) and "is due to the inexorable aging of the organism" (141).

The second postulate is a fundamental assumption of control theory in that relative differences in the tendency to engage in deviant behavior are stable over the life course (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2000, 58). This postulate emerges from two strands of empirical data: (1) the relative invariance of the age effect on crime from which it follows "that differences in criminality between individuals at one point in time must be present at subsequent points in time as well" (58) or that "differences between people in the likelihood that they will commit criminal acts persist over time" (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 107); and (2) the strong positive correlation between prior and future crime and delinquency.

According to the theorists, "Stability lies at the heart of the concept of self-control, and justifies our emphasis on early childhood socialization" (Gottfred-

son and Hirschi 1990, 58–59).[2] In fact, it could be stated that a major finding in criminology—that of stability—is one that had routinely been ignored or denied by extant theory until Gottfredson and Hirschi proposed the general theory of crime. Perhaps there is no better or stronger statement of the stability postulate than Hirschi and Gottfredson's (1995, 134) point, akin to David Farrington's (1992, 258) similar claim, regarding the stability evidence: "There is clear continuity over time in antisocial tendency. In other words, the antisocial child tends to become the antisocial teenager and the antisocial adult. . . . The relative orderings of any cohort of people on antisocial tendency is significantly consistent over time." And as Hirschi and Gottfredson surmised, "Differences between high- and low-rate offenders persist during the life course. Children ranked on the frequency of their delinquent acts will be ranked similarly later in life" (2001, 91).

The third postulate, regarding the versatility of offending, covers the idea that offenders are involved in a wide range of deviant, criminal, and analogous acts such that one need not to consider them as specific outcomes. In other words, individuals who engage in criminal acts, drug use, and other, more traditional crimes are also more likely to be involved in accidents, quit their jobs, fail to do their homework, engage in sexual promiscuity, engage in excessive gambling, and so forth. According Hirschi and Gottfredson, "Research ha[s] for some time shown that the behavior of offenders covers a broad range of criminal, deviant, and reckless acts. Indeed, the versatility finding is so widely accepted by the research community that [they] no longer feel compelled to defend it" (2000, 64). In making this claim, they are clear in noting that some specific crimes, such as "white-collar/corporate" crimes like tax evasion, stock swindles, and medical-billing fraud, are so "few in number and of limited interest to a behavioral theory" (65) that they need not be explained. Perhaps there is no clearer statement of the versatility postulate than the following: "Theories that assume specialization in particular forms of crime or deviant behavior are seriously at odds with good evidence" (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 119). And consider these two statements made by Gottfredson and Hirschi:

[2] It is important to remind readers here that Gottfredson and Hirschi do not discount the possibility of changes in absolute levels of self-control within individuals. As they note, "Combining little or no movement from high self-control to low self-control with the fact that socialization continues to occur throughout life produces the conclusion that the proportion of the population in the potential offender pool should tend to decline as cohorts age. . . . Even the most active offenders burn out with time. . . . Put another way, the low self-control group continues over time to exhibit low self-control. Its size, however, declines" (1990, 107–108). Elsewhere they point out that "individual differences in self-control are established early in life (before differences in criminal behavior, however the state defines it, are possible) and are reasonably stable thereafter" (177).

> Our portrait of the burglar applies equally well to the white-collar offender, the organized-crime offender, the dope dealer, and the assaulter; they are, after all, the same people. . . . They seem to do just about everything they can do: they do not specialize. (74, 190)

In short, after explicitly identifying the invariance of the age–crime relationship, Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime explicitly addresses the stability and versatility findings from extant criminological research and accounts for such findings with the concept of self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 119). As they surmise, "Both the stability of differences between individuals and the versatility of offenders can be derived from the fact that all such acts follow a predictable path over the life course, peaking in the middle to late teens, and then declining steadily throughout life" (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1994, 2).

To this list of Gottfredson and Hirschi's original postulates, I would argue that one more needs to be added: the generality postulate. This postulate contends that as a general theory of crime, with self-control as the principal correlate, self-control should be implicated in all sorts of deviant, criminal, and analogous acts, as the versatility postulate suggests. However, the generality postulate advanced here covers the theorists' expectation that the theory will be applicable across demographic groups and invariant across cultures, societies, times, and places. In this regard, Gottfredson and Hirschi are clear in noting that "the important correlates of crime do not vary across cultures" (1990, 178) or "social conditions" (128); "available data suggests that the age–crime relation is *invariant* across sex and race" (126; emphasis in the original); and "the age effect is everywhere and at all times the same" (124) and is for all people, irrespective of race, class, and other demographic characteristic (149–153). Perhaps there is no better summary statement of the generality postulate than this:

> Tests of generality or scope are, in our view, easy to devise. In criminology, it is often argued that special theories are required to explain female and male crime, crime in one culture rather than another, crime committed in the course of an occupation as distinct from street crime, or crime committed by children as distinct from crime committed by adults. . . . [W]e intend our theory to apply to all of these cases, and more. It is meant to explain *all crimes, at all times,* and, for that matter, many forms of behavior that are not sanctioned by the state. (117; emphasis added)

How has the general theory of crime held up with regard to research on these three postulates? The next section documents this accumulated knowledge base.

Strength of Empirical Support regarding the General Theory's Postulates

A number of high-quality reviews exist regarding the general theory's empirical record (see Goode 2007; Pratt and Cullen 2000). Here, a brief overview of the empirical support regarding the general theory's key postulates will be highlighted. This will be followed by a more expansive discussion of the public policy implications emanating from the general theory, as well as the extent to which such policy implications could be fruitful if applied in a policy context.

With respect to the age postulate generally, and the invariance thesis in particular, a wide range of studies have generated discrepant results. For example, some studies have shown that the relationship between age and crime is not precisely the same for all crimes and for all populations (Greenberg 1985; Steffensmeier et al. 1989). At the same time, there is much evidence in favor of shape invariance—that is, that the relationships between age and many kinds of crime across different populations adhere to the single, mid- to late-adolescence peak, followed by a decline in early adulthood (Farrington 1986). At the same time, a recent strand of research that employs advanced statistical and methodological tools (e.g., semi-parametric mixed Poisson model) that parcels out the aggregate age–crime curve into distinct trajectories of similar offenders often reveals that the unique trajectories do not resemble the aggregate age–crime curve (see Nagin 2005; Piquero 2007). In particular, several of these empirical studies show substantial and significant deviations from the aggregate trend (peaking in late adolescence and dropping in early adulthood). One study in particular, using data from criminal offenders in the Netherlands, shows that there is a small group of offenders who offend at relatively stable rates into middle to late adulthood (Blokland, Nagin, and Nieuwbeerta 2005). Further, John Laub and Robert Sampson's (2003) recent analysis of the official arrest records of the Glueck delinquent sample showed unique age–crime curves for different trajectory groups in general and across crime type, with the common finding that by age 70, most offenders had desisted from crime.[3]

One recent study that deserved further discussion comes from an analysis of survey data from Oklahoma. Here, Charles Tittle and Harold Grasmick (1997) provided three advances over the previous age–crime research: (1) data were based on subjects age 18–90; (2) data contained several indicators of crime; and (3) data contained several important and competing theoretical variables, in addition to self-control, that had not been previously used in tests

[3] True to form, Gottfredson and Hirschi dismiss the evidence that does not comport with their view of the age–crime relation in the following manner: "The question for criminology is whether the glass is 97 percent full or 3 percent empty—that is, whether to pursue the important implications of a remarkably robust age effect or to continue to revel in the statistical noise generated by atheoretical research" (1990, 134).

of the general theory of crime. In total, their analysis yielded a mixed bag of results. First, with regard to the "invariance hypothesis," they found fairly strong evidence, with the exception of tax cheating, of a single peak in late adolescence (when their data began) and a linear negative trend of offending into adulthood. Tittle and Grasmick interpret this result as one of generalizability but not necessarily complete invariance. Second, they found mixed results with regard to the "inexplicability hypothesis" regarding the ability of social variables to explain the age–crime relationship. That is, they were unable to explain most of the age effect. Third, their assessment of the "non-interaction hypothesis" that the correlates of crime do not interact with age also showed mixed results but that most variables did not interact with age. Finally, Tittle and Grasmick's analysis, in contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi, found that low self-control varied with age (i.e., it demonstrated a U-shaped relationship with age).

Regarding the stability postulate, some of its support (or lack thereof) was reviewed in the above section on age and crime, For this reason, this section focuses more on the assessment of the stability postulate within the context of two strands of literature: the relationship between past and future crime and the stability of self-control within individuals.[4]

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) are clear in noting that the best predictor of future criminal behavior is past criminal behavior. One of the first studies to directly assess this issue was Daniel Nagin and Raymond Paternoster's (1991) longitudinal analysis of the linkage between four self-reported delinquency acts in a two-wave panel of high-school students. Nagin and Paternoster cast their study within the two-pronged perspective of persistent heterogeneity and state dependence as the causal underpinning of the relationship between past and future delinquency, the former noting that unmeasured differences across individuals account for the relationship and the latter noting that prior offending alters the individual's situational or moral constraints in some fashion, which in turn increases their future offending. Results indicated more support for the state-dependence argument. In another study, Nagin and Farrington (1992) assessed a similar question with data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, a longitudinal study of 411 men in South London age 10–32. Results from this study showed strong support for persistent heterogeneity over state dependence. Several other studies yield similarly conflicting results, with Raymond Paternoster and Robert Brame (1997) finding support for state dependence; Shawn Bushway, Robert Brame, and Raymond Paternoster (1999) and Alex Piquero, Chris Gibson, and Stephen Tibbetts (2002) finding support for

[4] According to Hirschi and Gottfredson, "The positive correlation between past and future measures of crime net of the effects of other variables does not deny the influence of some enduring individual difference, such as level of self-control. On the contrary, such a correlation is 'fully consistent' with the idea that a 'latent behavioral trait' accounts for both measures" (2000, 64).

state dependence even in the wake of strong controls for persistent heterogeneity (which itself was important). This has led some scholars to call for a theory that is friendly to an integrated persistent heterogeneity and state dependence perspective to explain the relationship between prior and future delinquency generally and to account for crime over the life course in particular (see Laub and Sampson 2003; Paternoster et al. 1997).

Four studies have specifically examined the stability of self-control, using some type of attitudinal/behavioral measure, within and across persons over time. Bruce Arneklev, John Cochran, and Randy Gainey (1998) employed data on college students who were assessed at the beginning and end of a semester (four months apart) to examine the stability issue. Their analysis indicated that overall self-control was quite stable (test–retest correlation of .82), but that separate analyses of the self-control components showed somewhat less stability within persons. Michael Turner and Alex Piquero (2002) used data from a large sample of children followed through late adolescence in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and compared changes in self-control generally and among offenders and non-offenders in the NLSY in particular. Using both attitudinal and behavioral measures of self-control, four findings emerged from their effort: (1) prior to age 8, offenders and non-offenders did not differ significantly on self-control, but after age 8, offenders showed lower self-control than non-offenders; (2) self-control increased with age for both offenders and non-offenders; (3) within groups, the correlations between measures of self-control were positive and modest though not overly strong; and (4) when they isolated offenders and non-offenders in the bottom quartile on the behavioral measure of self-control during early adolescence and then compared these individuals with other sample members in the same group at three subsequent time periods, they found evidence of both stability and change in self-control. Ojmarrh Mitchell and Doris Layton MacKenzie (2006) used data from a two-wave panel of incarcerated offenders to examine two hypotheses regarding the stability postulate: (1) that after early childhood, interventions aimed at reducing antisocial behavior will be unsuccessful, as self-control is believed to be resilient to such efforts; and (2) that self-control was relatively stable among individuals over time. Their analysis indicated that self-control was not stable (in absolute or relative terms) during a short period of time, but that it was resilient to participation in a treatment-oriented boot camp program. Moreover, some of the components of their self-control measure actually fared worse during the imprisonment experience. Finally, L. Thomas Winfree, Terrance Taylor, Ni He, and Finn-Aage Esbensen (2006) examined self-control levels, self-reported illegal behavior, and supporting attitudes in a longitudinal study of youth from six cities at five points in time. Several key findings emerged from their effort, but I focus here on their specific findings with respect to the stability postulate. Importantly, their analysis did not find evidence for the hypothesis

that self-control is an "immutable and stable propensity" (278). Specifically, levels of self-control generally, and of impulsivity in particular, declined throughout the study period (as individuals aged), and this decline was more consistent in each year for offenders compared with non-offenders. Splitting the sample into offenders and non-offenders did little to change the overall conclusions from the study: that self-control is not a stable, immutable construct.[5]

The empirical record on the versatility postulate is probably the one area where Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory has received the most empirical support. Prior to the delineation of their theory, researchers had long been interested in the patterning of offenses within offenders over the course of their criminal careers (see Blumstein et al. 1986; Farrington, Snyder, and Finnegan, 1988; Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972). This line of research generated the summary conclusion that there was very little evidence of specialization among offenders and that versatility was a characteristic of offenders' careers—and, in fact, was used as a large cornerstone of the general theory.

Since the publication of *A General Theory of Crime,* a number of scholars have continued to assess the versatility issue. In fact, empirical tests of the versatility postulate are clear and straightforward to conduct because one is interested in knowing simply where those who engage in one crime are more likely to engage in other deviant or criminal activities. In general, results continue to remain supportive of Gottfredson and Hirschi's contention that individuals involved in one form or type of deviant or criminal behavior are likely to be involved in other forms and types of deviant behavior over the life course. The versatility postulate is perhaps the one part of the theory that most criminologists accept, yet some continue to question whether particular crimes, such as terrorism and tax evasion, fall under the theory's purview and whether these acts, as Hirschi and Gottfredson (2000, 65) suggest, are "few in number and of limited interest to behavioral theory."

For example, Chester Britt (1994) used three different data sources (offense-specific data from the Uniform Crime Reports, data from the Bail Decision-Making Study, and self-reported data from the Seattle Youth Survey) to assess the specialization question and failed to find any evidence that offenders specialize in the types of crime they commit. David Evans, Francis Cullen, Velmer Burton, R. Gregory Dunaway, and Michael Benson (1997) used self-reported data from a sample of Midwestern individuals and found that offenders were more frequently involved in non-criminal forms of deviance than non-offenders and that the effect of self-control on crime and analogous behaviors was virtually

[5] They also found that the relative intergroup rankings for impulsivity and risk seeking (when comparisons were made between offenders and non-offenders in the lowest quartile and then among offenders and non-offenders in the highest quartile) did not change over time (Winfree et al. 2006, 279).

identical.[6] Using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Paternoster and Brame (1998) examined the empirical association between self-control at age 8–9 and self-reported involvement in a variety of criminal and analogous acts during adolescence. Their analysis indicated that self-control was associated with both outcomes, as Gottfredson and Hirschi would suggest, but that the covariance between criminal and analogous behaviors could not be explained entirely by self-control.

Other research has linked self-control to myriad deviant and antisocial outcomes, including accidents and illnesses (Robins 1978), death (Piquero et al. 2005), binge drinking and assorted alcohol-related consequences (Piquero, Gibson, and Tibbetts 2002), and differential sanction threat perceptions (Piquero, Gomez-Smith, and Langton, 2004). Even further, some researchers have found very little evidence for specialization in sexual (Lussier, LeBlanc, and Proulx, 2005; Zimring 2004) or violent (Capaldi and Patterson 1996; Farrington 1989; Piquero 2000) offending. In general, these efforts have shown that the best predictor of a particular crime type is the frequency of offending.[7]

With this review in hand, the next section of the chapter focuses on the policy implications that emanate from the general theory of crime generally, and from each postulate in particular.

Policy Implication Emanating from Each Postulate

It is the case that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, 1995; see also Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001) have devoted some time to public policy implications throughout their collective works. Instead of listing such implications within a postulate framework, they do provide a more general listing that is useful to reproduce here. This will present a good overview before turning to the postulate-specific policy implications. It is important to note that the theorists are just as clear about what they think will be effective with regard to crime control as about what they believe will be ineffective (criminal career programs, modifications in policing, selective incapacitation, and so on; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 274).

[6] To be sure, several of the acts in the Evans et al. (1997) analogous behavior index were actually criminal offenses (e.g., drunk driving, use of illegal drugs).

[7] Clearly, some researchers still do not view the evidence in favor of versatility in the same light. For example, Gilbert Geis concludes, "Research indicates, however, that criminal offenders are not necessarily polymorphously perverse. . . . Offenders often specialize" (2000, 43). Some studies do offer evidence of some level of specialization in offending. For example, in their analysis of white-collar offenders, Benson and Moore (1992) find that those who commit garden-variety white-collar crimes can, as a group, be distinguished from those who commit more general street offenses. Richard Wright and colleagues' (1995) analysis of residential burglars makes the specialization claim as a function of the acquired expertise gained by burglars as a result of the commission of that specific crime type.

The policy implications arising from the general theory of crime stem directly from Gottfredson and Hirschi's image of the offender (youthfulness, limited cognitive skills, and low self-control) and of crimes (which provide immediate, obvious benefit; are easily accomplished; and require little skill, planning, or persistence). Recall that offenders are believed to be easily deterred by increasing the immediate difficulties and risks of criminal acts and are generally unaffected by changes in the long-term costs of criminal behavior. To Gottfredson and Hirschi, steering wheel locks (which increase certainty) are more effective than increased penalties (severity) in reducing auto theft. Such a view is entirely consistent with evidence on deterrence theory, which shows that the certainty of punishment is a more effective inhibitor of crime than its severity (Nagin 1998). Thus, within the context of the general theory of crime, crimes can be prevented in part by making them more complex or difficult to commit.

Borrowing from the rational choice framework (Cornish and Clarke 1987), the general theory of crime supports an offense-specific approach to crime prevention. Offense-specific approaches begin by analyzing the conditions necessary for a particular act to occur. As Hirschi and Gottfredson (2001, 93) note: "Efforts directed at offenders—treatment, deterrence, incapacitation—will be highly inefficient compared to programs that restrict access to [committing crime]." Thus, consistent with more general evidence on crime control (Sherman et al. 2002), more impact in crime reduction will emerge from making crime harder to commit than from anything else and from keeping offenders guessing (Koper 1995). Thus, according to Hirschi and Gottfredson:

> Self-control theory leads to the conclusion that the formal criminal justice system can play only a minor role in the prevention and control of crime. Because potential offenders do not consider the long-term consequences of their acts, modification of these consequences will have little effect on their behavior. Because criminal acts are so quickly and easily accomplished, they are only rarely directly observed by agents of the criminal justice system. As a result, even large increases in the number of such agents would have minimal effect on the rates of most crimes. (2001, 93)

These and other considerations led the theorists to advance the following eight recommendations for crime control policy (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1995; Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001, 93–94).

1. Do not attempt to control crime by incapacitating adults; this is so because by the time offenders are identified and incarcerated in

adulthood, they have already finished the brunt of their criminal activity.
2. Do not attempt to control crime by rehabilitating adults; this is so because the age effect makes treatment unnecessary and no treatment program has been shown to be effective.
3. Do not attempt to control crime by altering the penalties available to the criminal justice system; this is so because legal penalties do not have the desired effect because offenders do not consider them. Increasing the certainty and severity will have a highly limited effect on the decisions of offenders.
4. Restrict unsupervised activities of teenagers; by limiting teens' access to guns, cars, and alcohol, opportunities become restricted.
5. Limit proactive policing, including sweeps, stings, intensive arrest programs, aggressive drug policies.
6. Question the characterization of crime offered by agents of the criminal justice system and repeated by the media; this is so because evidence suggests that offenders are not dedicated, professional.
7. Support programs designed to provide early education and effective child care; this is so because prevention [and] intervention in the early years are most important. Programs that target dysfunctional families and seek to remedy lack of supervision have shown promise.
8. Support policies that promote and facilitate two-parent families and that increase the number of caregivers relative to the number of children; this is so because large and single-parent families are handicapped with respect to monitoring and discipline (the key elements in producing adequate socialization and strong self-control). Programs to prevent teen pregnancies should be given high priority.

With this listing in hand, let us turn now to a postulate-specific review of policy implications arising from the general theory of crime.

Age Postulate

Because Gottfredson and Hirschi believe the age–crime relation to be invariant across time, space, place, and people, and because they believe the age–crime relation to be inexplicable by any theory, they contend that time is the best healer of criminal activity. In other words, with the aging of the person, crime will inevitably decrease. Thus, for Gottfredson and Hirschi a clear policy implication is that lengthy incarceration stints, mandatory maximum penalties, and associated three strikes laws will do little to alter criminal activity at the aggregate or individual level.

Stability Postulate

Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the best predictor of future criminal behavior is prior criminal behavior, that self-control is relatively stable between individuals (though absolute, within-person levels of self-control may change), and that self-control is impervious to change from external sources of social control after the first decade of life. The policy implication stemming from this stability postulate is such that if one wants to achieve any measure of lowering the chances of criminal activity, attention must be focused on the first ten to twelve years of a child's life. Gottfredson and Hirschi paint a very dismal portrait for the prospect of change after this dynamic time period lapses. There is good evidence with respect to the success of early childhood intervention and prevention efforts from various sources. For example, David Olds and colleagues' (1998) nurse home-visitation program uncovered strong results (lower crime, lower drug use, better school performance) for mothers and their children who participated in a nurse home-visitation program in the first two to three years of life. Similar positive results were obtained by children participating in the Perry Preschool Program (Schweinhart et al. 2005), where a longitudinal follow-up of a small sample of African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school who received a high-quality preschool program were found at age 40 to have higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool. Finally, Richard Tremblay and colleagues' (1996) Montreal Longitudinal-Experimental Study combined child skills training and parent training to identify disruptive (aggressive/hyperactive) boys at age 6 and randomly allocated more than three hundred of them to experimental or control conditions. In the following two to three years, the boys in the experimental group received training designed to foster social skills and self-control, while the parents were taught how to provide positive reinforcement, use non-punitive and consistent discipline practices, and develop family-crisis-management techniques. Follow-up analyses at age 12 showed that, compared with boys in the control group, the boys in the experimental group committed less theft and burglary, were less likely to get drunk, and were less likely to be involved in fights. Other findings showed that the boys in the experimental group had higher school achievement and were less likely to be gang members, get drunk, or take drugs. All of these studies provide support for what has come to be known outside the general theory of crime parlance as developmental crime prevention (Farrington and Welsh 2007; Tremblay and Craig 1995).

Although good evidence exists on the malleability of self-control in the first decade of life, it is important to return to Gottfredson and Hirschi's stance that self-control is unlikely to change after this time period in response to external sources of social control. Thus, they contend that rehabilitation efforts and

cognitive skills training will have little success for individuals in the teenage and adult years. What is the evidence with respect to the changeability of self-control after childhood? The record on this point is unfriendly to Gottfredson and Hirschi. In fact, a number of prevention and intervention efforts in childhood and adulthood do hold some promise for both altering self-control and reducing criminal behavior. Moreover, external sources of social control have shown alterations with respect to individual self-control, including schools (Gottfredson 2001; Turner, Pratt, and Piquero, 2005), neighborhoods (Pratt, Turner, and Piquero 2004), correctional facilities (Mitchell and MacKenzie 2006), and several treatment efforts (see, e.g., Sherman et al. 2002).

Versatility Postulate

Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the evidence with regard to versatility is such that offenders engage in all sorts of deviant, antisocial, and criminal acts and that they will not respond to specific points of intervention other than to shift to another type of crime when opportunities for a certain one are limited. There is some evidence with respect to how offenders choose crime targets (Cornish and Clarke 1987; Jacobs 1996; Piquero and Rengert 1999; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997) but little by way of information at the individual, perceptual level about differential responses to perceived constraints on and blockages of criminal opportunity and how offenders react to them. More generally, the issue here with respect to crime prevention is such that because Gottfredson and Hirschi believe the within-person causes of a deviant act such as truancy are the same as the within-person causes of drug use, aggravated assault, tax evasion, and so forth, the criminal justice system will have little effect on any of them. Instead, efforts should be aimed at dealing not necessarily with specific crimes (though making some crimes more difficult to commit may have some modicum of success) but instead at dealing with the origins of criminal behavior: self-control. Thus, to deal with the versatility problem, Gottfredson and Hirschi suggest that efforts must be aimed at the offender; if self-control is instilled, then a reduction in the range of deviant, antisocial, and criminal acts is likely to follow. Efforts aimed at improving self-control appear to have success in reducing various forms of deviant, antisocial, and criminal activity (Farrington and Welsh 2007; Tremblay et al. 1996), as Gottfredson and Hirschi hypothesize.

What Is the Likelihood of Achieving These Policy Implications?

Achieving policy implications is one thing; getting them to the discussion table in the first place seems like a good place to start. So let us begin there.

Many of the specific policy implications emerging from the general theory of crime are intuitive; are easily grasped by academics, policymakers, and citizens alike; and are likely to be embraceable (though not necessarily embraced). Some readers may have qualms about Gottfredson and Hirschi's specific recommendations or about those inferred from the theory's postulates. For example, although Gottfredson and Hirschi claim that the police have no effect on crime, there is ample evidence to suggest that in some contexts the police do have some effect on crime, but it should be remembered that what the police do on the street is the most important—that is, keeping offenders guessing, rotating crackdowns, and the like (Koper 1995; Sherman 1990). To say that the police have no effect on crime, as Gottfredson and Hirschi do, is an overstatement. Similarly, there is good evidence that some rehabilitation and intervention efforts and programs can increase self-control, improve decision making, and reduce crime regardless of whether the effort is instilled in childhood, adolescence, or even adulthood. So some of their strong statements about what does not work are likely to be met with serious disagreement backed by empirical research.

Boiled down to its core, Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime really has two key policy prescriptions: a short-term strategy that makes criminal events less attractive to potential offenders by making them more difficult to commit successfully (increase certainty); and a longer-term strategy that focuses prevention and intervention efforts that improve child-rearing practices (which produce more self-control) in the first decade of life. Good evidence exists on both of these fronts, and the costs are not as exorbitant as are the costs associated with the continued incarceration binge that the United States currently faces and will continue to face in the years to come. These efforts, many of which are described more specifically in other sources (for efforts to increase certainty of detection and punishment, see Nagin 1998; for efforts to improve child-rearing practices, see Tremblay et al. 1996), have been found to be successful and not cost-prohibitive. With a short- and long-term focus, there is something for everyone. The cost of instilling these efforts is small, and the rewards may be great. Given the knowledge of weak effects at high costs for mass incarceration, it seems prudent to give serious consideration to the short- and long-term strategies that emanate from the general theory of crime with respect to crime control.

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