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Social Control Theory

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Social Control Theory

Introduction

In the US, the law enforcement agencies, the justice system, and correctional institutions attract immense criticism in regards to their dealings with criminal offenders. The fact that the US prison populations are at a record high is public knowledge. However, the need to ask pertinent questions about such cases cannot be understated. Linking trends in crime and the role of respective institutions mandated to prevent and control it is imperative. While some scholars attempt to create a distinction between the concepts of crime prevention, control, and punishment, the relationship between these factors is critical to solving the problem that threatens the American social fabric. For this reason, unlike many criminology philosophies which imply to describe why individuals commit criminal offenses, the control theory presents the reasoning for why persons comply with rules. Welsh and Pfeffer's (2013) assertion that the current American crime mitigation programs are biased towards punishment justifies the need to examine the role of social control theory in crime prevention. The search for a new crime policy founded on the discourses of science and politics cannot be used as a basis to discredit traditional strategies that have been used to fight crime, in which social control theory features prominently. Therefore, social control theory has a role in crime prevention and control based on an understanding that punishment serves as a deterrent for crime.

To accomplish its purpose, the essay is structured into a number of sections. The introduction gives a general overview of the factors behind its conceptualization and introduces the social control theory and its significance in relation to the context. The analysis and synthesis section defines the social control theory and presents the underlying concepts. The section explores the background of the theory including the social and cultural contexts in which it is

applicable. Classification of the social control theory will be undertaken in this section. The next section examines the theoretical basis of the theory in crime prevention and control and its plausibility in resolving the issue. The discussion section deals with application of the principles of social control theory in crime prevention programs and its role as the solution to the problem. The conclusion revisits the issue and offers recommendations for consideration in future application of the theory.

Analysis and Synthesis of Major Ideas of Social Control Theory

Social control theories deviate from the common approach used by criminology theories, purporting to explain why people offend, by providing justification for obedience of the rules by individual. Social control theory is based on a learning process through rewards and punishments. In this light, the major assumption underpinning the social control theory is that the desire to commit crime is natural and conformity to law in the face of temptation is the concept that needs explanation. The theory perceives criminality as a possibility for all individuals within the society, which is avoided by those determined to maintain familiar and strong social bonds. Therefore, the theory is based on the proposal linking exploitation of the process of social control and social learning with increase in self-control and reduction in prospective indulgence in behavior perceives as antisocial. Such is the case because the theory assumes that individuals who can see the advantages of crime are driven to execute all manner of criminal acts without motivation of prior training. The theory assumes further that motivation to commit crime rests on understanding of the cost associated with such behavior. It recognizes the cost of crime in terms of disapproval by the people whom the prospective offender cares.

Social control theory gained prominence between 1960s and 1990s following the innovative rendering version by Travis Hirschi that was built on existing concept of the theory

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including the functionalist theories of crime proposed by Ivan Nye in 1958. The modern social control theory also draws from earlier proponents including Edward Ross, Albert Reiss, Jackson Toby, and David Matza, and Walter Reckless. Each of these proponents developed unique explanations about the theory to justify their assumptions and provide a framework for its implementation. According to Wortley *et al.* (2008), Hirschi contended that social ties to family, school and other aspects of society play a crucial role in diminishing the propensity for deviant behavior. Therefore, Hirschi social control theory postulates that crime occurs when such bonds are weakened or are not established appropriately. Control theorists advance that without such social bonds, crime becomes an attractive venture. The absence of strong bonds and relationships with conventional others is thought to free individuals of social constraints, hence allowing them to engage in delinquent practices. Overall, the social control theory is founded on moral accountability to which the society holds each of its members. Failure of this systemic framework realizes individuals from their perceived moral obligation, thus increasing their chances of engaging in delinquency.

Exploration of the strengths of social control theory, particularly in young people, has relied on examination of the bond with family, school, community, and religion to ascertain the extent to which they influence offending. According to Wortley *et al.* (2008), these factors have the potential to influence policy on crime control and form the fundamental basis for self-control theory. Social control theory is central to development of alternative crime prevention measures, and its notions are centuries old, originating from the age of enlightenment thinkers and the classical school of criminology. Individuals have the inherent tendency toward self-indulgence and evil, practices that call for external restraint and involvement of the government to ensure control of the anti-social behavior.

Theoretical Basis of Social Control Theory in Crime Prevention

Welsh and Pfeffer (2013) contended that crime prevention is a concept defined by unique characteristics that include emphasis on intervention before the occurrence of crime, and operation outside the justice system. Therefore, social control is arguably the theoretically sound, feasible, highly effective, and worthwhile approach to reducing crime. According to Welsh and Farrington (2012), the theory is a socially progressive approach considered as the fourth pillar of crime reduction alongside government institutions of police, courts, and corrections. Welsh and Pfeffer (2013) expressed concerns about the current view of crime prevention that enlists a full range of techniques ranging from home visits to prison sentences, and call for a return to the original meaning of crime prevention. The assertions can be attributed to the proliferation in literature advancing theories on how to rediscover and institutionalize crime prevention using the social control theory.

The increase in calls for alternative crime prevention measures is informed by the observed inefficiency of existing imprisonment approach, which some factions argue to be the reason for rise in crime rates in the US. Weisburd *et al.* (2014) examined the implementation of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs and established the need for targeted approaches that address situational opportunities and social characteristics of places labeled as crime hot spots. In the context of social control theory, social characteristics can be looked at in terms of existing family, school, and community perceptions of anti-social behavior. Where such behavior is not criticized or reproached through punitive social strategies that deny the offender the opportunity to have strong bonds with the people they care for, delinquency is likely to spike. According to Weisburd *et al.* (2014), micro strategies targeted at crime hot spots have the potential to be effective compared to those implemented in larger communities or

neighborhoods. The argument can be justified changing perception of crime as a costly in a small population segment is easier, and the approach can easily be implemented using social control theory. A comprehensive developmental approach that integrates the social development model, which integrates social control theory and social learning theory, is mooted as effective in such settings. The social development model advances the argument that the critical units of socialization identified under the social control theory, namely, family, school, peers, and community, influence behavior sequentially. Hawkins and Weis (2017) observed that presentation of individuals with the opportunity to engage in conforming activities in each unit leads to positive socialization because of the developed skills needed for involvement, and reward of desired behavior by those the individuals interact with consistently. The overall outcomes are increase in attachment to others, commitment to conforming behavior, and belief in the conventional order due to the social bonds that develop.

Increase in exploration of the use of social control theory as a strategy for crime prevention has a basis on recent literature which suggest the potential of reduction in imprisonment to reduce crime rates. It is important to note that policing and corrections are the most dominant crime reduction strategies in the US. However, thee budgetary constraints to the government and associated inefficiency generate the need for alternative, cheap, and effective approaches. Welsh and Farrington (2012) reiterated the need for a new crime policy that is evidence-based, an observation associated to numerous attempts at justifying social control theory as effective in accomplishing the goal. The social control theory addresses pertinent aspects of prevention science and evidence-based policy, hence proves essential in creating clear linkages between research and policy. Overall, it is evident that social control theory has a strong

basis for application in modern crime prevention programs that seek to diverge from the contemporary policing and correctional strategies.

Application of Social Control Theory Principles to Crime Prevention

The view advanced by social control theory is that crime acts as a trigger for identification of boundaries for behavior, which communities recognize collectively and reinforces through negative reactions. The factor of utmost significance in application of social control theory in crime prevention programs is in its functionality as a community and individual initiative. The approach represents a paradigm shift from the policing and correctional strategies that form the traditional frameworks of crime prevention and control. By refusing association with antisocial or evil behavior, the society can effectively force prospective delinquent members to conform to the generally accepted norms, hence discouraging the propensity to commit crime. The use of social control theory to prevent crime draws from the assumption that individuals are discouraged from antisocial behavior after learning that involvement will attract punishment including banishment from their units of socialization. Therefore, the theory encourages conformity to what is morally acceptable to the family, school, peers, and community to which an individual is a member. Under social control theory, offenders are not threatened by legal penalties, and their behavior cannot be changed by altering the severity of legal punishment. In fact, Durlauf and Nagin (2011) established that increasing legal punishment only serves to increase the number of potential offenders, probationers, inmates, and parolees. Under the current structure that places focus on incarceration and rehabilitation, these individuals are thought to benefit from the human alternative to punishment. However, the assumption is far from the truth when examined under the lens of social control theory, which advances the school of thought that exposure of offenders to the criminal justice system, has little impact. The

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criminal justice system receives individuals after committing the offense, implying it has no influence on their prior or subsequent behavior.

The application of the social control theory in the prevention of crime is linked to the self-control theory of crime. Hirschi conceptualized that while control theory emphasized on the role of social bonds as insulators against engagement in criminality, the general theory of crime recognizes the role of low self-control in enhancing delinquent behavior (Wortley *et al.*, 2008).

Social control theory employs a number of compatible crime prevention strategies including situational crime prevention, routine activity approach, and environmental design. The underlying assumption of the models is that prevention rests on addressing the conditions necessary for occurrence, which can be achieved by reducing the benefits of crime by making them costly or hazardous, hence, discouraging people from delinquent behavior.

Social control theorists have proposed a number of control strategies that form the basis for application the principle in question. Ivan Nye emphasized on direct control, which involves actual threat of punishment for antisocial behavior and reward of compliance. The indirect control seeks to identify with those who influence behavior through learning of the consequences of crime such a pain and disappointment to those the offender shares social relationships with. Internal control is a strategy of refrain from delinquency through conscience. Therefore, crime prevention programs should target to instill these elements of control that serve as deterrents under social control theory. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on developing a positive self-image that makes crime a tarnishing undertaking. Implementation of social control theory in crime prevention must draw from other related theories. For instance, building positive self-conception and self-image to insulate against criminality is dependent on the containment theory. This theory is implemented in two phases: inner containment that targets a positive self and outer

containment, which involves supervision and discipline. It is evident that application of social control theory in crime prevention programs requires collaborative efforts of all stakeholders including parents, peers, school management, and the community. This is informed by the need for uniformity across the board in relation to and individual social setting. Setting the standards on what is right and what is not in all social units in which delinquent individuals share social bonds can motivate them towards self-control. However, it is important to understand that despite being mooted as the best alternative to the traditional incarceration and rehabilitation system, social control is criticized for its strong advocacy for conformity and selective incapacitation over freedom. Therefore, the question that must be answered is whether the detriments of social control outweigh its benefits in comparison to the two dominant approaches of incarceration and correction.

Conclusion

The population in the US prisons is growing exponentially, posing budget challenges to the government, a situation exacerbated by observations of the ineffectiveness of the dominant approaches, including imprisonment and rehabilitation, to prevent crime. Therefore, suggestion of social control theory as an alternative is justified, and this is supported by evidence showing that punitive approaches by the criminal justice system have actually resulted to an increase in the number of offenders. Social control theory shifts focus from the legal and justice framework to the social paradigm, where an individual attaches significant value to the bonds they share with those in their units of socialization. Nevertheless, review of the social control theory and its application in crime prevention reveals the existence of grey areas that must be clarified by future studies.

Future Recommendations

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The need for evidence-based approaches for successful implementation cannot be understated, which call for extensive research into the relationship between social control strategies and reduction in delinquent behavior. Another area that remains unclear is how social control theory would be integrated into policy, which calls for exploration of existing frameworks and how they can be adjustment to accommodate alternative approaches to crime prevention.

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