**Social control theory**

Social control theorists maintain that all people have the potential to violate the law and that modern society presents many opportunities for illegal activity. Criminal activities, such as drug abuse and car theft, are often exciting pastimes that hold the promise of immediate reward and gratification.

The version of control theory articulated by **Travis Hirschi** in his influential 1969 book Causes of Delinquency is today the dominant version of control theory. Hirschi links the onset of criminality to weakening of the ties that bind people to society. He assumes that all individuals are potential law violators, but most are kept under control because they fear that illegal behavior will damage their relationships with friends, family, neighbors, teachers, and employers. Without these social bonds, or ties, a person is free to commit criminal acts. Across all ethnic, religious, racial, and social groups, people whose bond to society is weak may fall prey to criminogenic behavior patterns. Hirschi argues that the social bond a person maintains with society is divided into four main elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

* Attachment consists of a person’s sensitivity to and interest in others. Hirschi views parents, peers, and schools as the important social institutions with which a person should maintain ties. Attachment to parents is the most important. Even if a family is shattered by divorce or separation, a child must retain a strong attachment to one or both parents. Without this attachment, it is unlikely that respect for other authorities will develop.
* Commitment involves the time, energy, and effort expended in conventional actions such as getting an education and saving money for the future. If people build a strong commitment to conventional society, they will be less likely to engage in acts that jeopardize their hard-won position.
* People who live in the same social setting often share common moral beliefs; they may adhere to such values as sharing, sensitivity to the rights of others, and admiration for the legal code. If these beliefs are absent or weakened, individuals are more likely to participate in antisocial or illegal acts.
* Involvement in conventional activities such as sports, clubs, and school leaves little time for illegal behavior. Hirschi believes that involvement in school, recreation, and family insulates people from the lure of criminal behavior. Idleness, on the other hand, enhances that lure.

Hirschi further suggests that the interrelationship among the elements of the social bond controls subsequent behavior. For example, people who feel kinship and sensitivity to parents and friends should be more likely to adopt and work toward legitimate goals. A person who rejects such social relationships is more likely to lack commitment to conventional goals. Similarly, people who are highly committed to conventional acts and beliefs are more likely to be involved in conventional activities.

**Testing social control theory**

One of Hirschi’s most significant contributions to criminology was his attempt to test the principal hypotheses of social control theory. He administered a detailed self-report survey to a sample of more than 4,000 junior and senior high school students in Contra Costa County, California. In a detailed analysis of the data, Hirschi found considerable evidence to support the control theory model. Among Hirschi’s more important findings are the following:

* Youths who were strongly attached to their parents were less likely to commit criminal acts.
* Youths involved in conventional activity, such as homework, were less likely to engage in criminal behavior.
* Youths involved in unconventional behavior, such as smoking and drinking, were more prone to delinquency.
* Youths who maintained weak, distant relationships with people tended toward delinquency.
* Those who shunned unconventional acts were attached to their peers.
* Delinquents and nondelinquents shared similar beliefs about society.

Even when the statistical significance of Hirschi’s findings was less than he expected, the direction of his research data was notably consistent. Only rarely did his findings contradict the theory’s most critical assumptions. Hirschi’s version of social control theory has been corroborated by numerous research studies showing that delinquent youths often feel detached from society. Some important findings of Hirschi’s theory are as follows;

**Attachment**

Kids who are attached to their families, friends, and school are less likely to get involved in a deviant peer group and consequently are less likely to engage in criminal activities. Teens who are attached to their parents are also able to develop the social skills that equip them both to maintain harmonious social ties and to escape life stresses such as school failure. In contrast, family detachment, including intrafamily conflict, abuse of children, and lack of affection, supervision, and family pride, are predictive of delinquent conduct. Attachment to education is equally important. Youths who are detached from the educational experience are at risk of criminality; those who are committed to school are less likely to engage in delinquent acts. Detachment and alienation from school may be even more predictive of delinquency than school failure and/or educational underachievement.

**Belief**

Research efforts have shown that holding positive beliefs is inversely related to criminality. Children who are involved in religious activities and hold conventional religious beliefs are less likely to become involved in substance abuse. Kids who live in areas marked by strong religious values and who hold strong religious beliefs themselves are less likely to engage in delinquent activities than adolescents who do not hold such beliefs or who live in less devout communities.

**Commitment**

As predicted by Hirschi, kids who are committed to school and educational achievement are less likely to become involved in delinquent behaviors than those who lack such commitment. The association may be reciprocal: Kids who drink and engage in deviant behavior are more likely to fail in school; kids who fail in school are more likely to later drink and engage in deviant behavior.

**Involvement**

Research shows that youths who are involved in conventional leisure activities, such as supervised social activities and noncompetitive sports, are less likely to engage in delinquency than those who are involved in unconventional leisure activities and unsupervised, peer-oriented social pursuits. Although there are gender differences in involvement, members of both sexes are less likely to commit crime if they are engaged in conventional activities.