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Social Support Theory

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In the study of crime and delinquency, what has come to be called social support theory has its origins in Cullen's (1994) presidential address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. In the address, entitled "Social support as an organizing concept for criminology," Cullen argued that the notion of social support is threaded through many theories of crime and delinquency. Cullen distinguished between macro-level and interpersonal-level effects of social support, emphasizing how supportive societies and supportive relationships, respectively, can lessen crime rates and individual crime. He also implicated social support in the processes of social control and criminal justice, arguing that effective social control and rehabilitation are predicated on support. Unlike other theories of crime and delinquency, which tend to focus on how something negative causes crime (e.g., lack of social bonds; strain; low self-control; learned deviant attitudes or behaviors; labeling and stigma; community disorganization), social support theory focuses on how something positive can prevent or reduce risk for crime (Cao et al., 2010).

Social support is commonly conceptualized as the social resources on which an individual can rely when dealing with life problems and stressors (Thoits, 1995). Elaborating on this idea, Cullen, Wright, and Chamlin (1999) described social support as a process of transmitting

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human, cultural, material, and social capital, whether between individuals or between larger social units (communities, states) and their members. Support is often provided informally, through social relationships, but support can also be provided formally by an entity with an official status, such as government assistance programs or the justice system. Social support has direct and indirect effects on delinquency and other indicators of well-being. As a direct effect, people who experience social support may engage in less delinquency. As an indirect effect, social support may act as a buffer between risk factors for delinquency and participation in delinquent behavior.

Social support has several dimensions (Thoits, 2011). First, support can be conceptualized as perceived, feeling supported or feeling that support is available, versus received, reporting that assistance was provided. Second, support can be instrumental, informational, or emotional in nature. Instrumental support refers to the provision of materials or assistance with practical tasks or problems, such as lending money or borrowing a car. Informational support refers to advice giving, guidance, or providing information that may help a person solve a problem. Emotional support involves the expression of sympathy, caring, esteem, value, or encouragement.

Third, social support can be distinguished by its source. Members of an individual's primary group, significant others such as family members and friends, are frequently considered sources of support. Individuals may also draw support from their secondary groups, in which relationships are more regulated or hierarchical and less personal, such as schools and religious organizations. The most important sources of support, the level of support in a relationship, and the impact of support on behaviors vary over the life course (Umberson, Crosnoe, and Reczek, 2010). For juveniles, parents, peers, and school sources tend to be the most relevant.

Variations in both the availability and experience of social support arise out of structural conditions; that is, social context and social location shape the amount and quality of the relationships on which one can rely on for social support (Turner and Marino, 1994). In addition to interpersonal connections~ social support can be viewed as a property of the communities or even larger ecological units in which an individual is situated. A similar concept is found in social altruism theory (Chamlin and Cochran, 1997), which argues that the willingness

of communities to commit scarce resources to assist their members is inversely related to crime rates. Whereas social altruism theory emphasizes that community altruism is distinct (and more relevant) from any offered by the state, social support theory argues that supportive societies entail both community (i.e., charitable) and government sources. Despite this difference, both approaches recognize that the provision of social support is more than instrumental assistance; rather, supportive communities also attend to members' emotional and informational needs.

Cullen offered two key propositions regarding the relationship between supportive communities/ societies and rates of crime and delinquency. First, societies differ in the level of resources they commit to meeting their members' needs. The more deficient a society is in this regard, the higher its rate of crime will be. Second, within nations, the less social support there is in a community, the higher its rate of crime will be. Communities afforded less government assistance, with weakened social institutions, with disrupted social networks, and with low levels of volunteerism and charitability are less well situated to provide support to their members. Relatedly, support specifically provided to families within states or communities results in less crime. Support for parenting, child care, and family well-being, including informational, instrumental, and emotional needs, directly affects a number of risk factors for delinquency.

At the macro level, social support and social altruism, measured by state-based transfer payments (e.g., Aid for Dependent Children), state spending on social programs such as healthcare and education, or private charitable donations and volunteerism, are related to lower crime rates. Social support may act to buffer the deleterious effects of other macro-level factors associated with higher crime rates, such as ethnic heterogeneity and economic inequality. State-based social support has also been linked to lower levels of anomie. The bulk of the research literature lends support to the macro-level aspects of the theory, but there have also been null findings in which measures of social support were unrelated to crime rates.

Explicit tests of macro-level social support theory are still relatively new and more research is needed to understand how ecological units manifest social support. One key issue is the measurement of social support. Many studies of macro-level social support rely on measures

of government expenditure, so the effects of private or charitable supports are less understood. A second issue requiring more investigation is the relationship between macro-level social support and rates of juvenile offending. The extant research suggests that communities with higher levels of civic engagement by their populaces have lower rates of juvenile crime.

Cullen argued that social support is a key theoretical concept influencing the likelihood of individual criminal behavior. In general, the more social support there is in an individual's social network, the less likely it is that person will engage in crime. Among adolescents, the more support provided by the family, particularly positive, sustained relationships with parents, the lower is the risk for delinquency. Social support can create a context in which strong prosocial bonds form and also create a context in which parental and other social controls are most efficacious. Certainly, comparisons can be drawn between social support and the notion of attachment in social control theory. Attachment can be characterized by time spent with family and others, involvement in relationships, and emotional closeness, concepts akin to social support. Families and social networks may be sources of informal control that discourage delinquent behavior, but they also provide instrumental, informational, and emotional supports that may protect individuals from other risk factors for delinquency.

Social support also plays a role in the social learning of crime. On the one hand, the well-known correlation between having delinquent peers and one's own delinquency may be tied to the support received from those peers for an individual's valuing and performing delinquent roles. On the other hand, social support from conformist sources is likely to promote the learning of conformist values and behaviors. Cullen terms this «differential social support.» Criminal behavior is less likely when social support comes from conformist sources and when social support for an individual's conformity exceeds social support for crime.

In addition to its implications for informal control and social learning, social support is also a key element in helping an individual deal with strains that could lead to criminal outcomes. According to general strain theory, social support fosters resiliency and legitimate coping in the face of strain, promoting prosocial adaptations to strain. Adolescents with conventional social support are in a better position

to handle strain in a nondelinquent manner, because supports offer a way to avoid or navigate the strain, or supports encourage nondeviant coping mechanisms.

In creating social support theory, Cullen applied evidence gained about the importance of social relationships in these other theories. At the interpersonal level, much of the evidence for the effect of social support on offending comes from studies that include social support or similar measures in their analyses. As with macro-level tests, the variety of ways in which support is operationalized may contribute to differences in empirical information. Research is mixed on the role of social support in the relationship between strain and delinquency. Overall, however, research confirms the positive effects of social support. Social support has been shown to promote school engagement and other pro social behaviors, to protect adolescents from depression and other mental health issues, and to limit delinquency and other problem behaviors. Further research is necessary to explore the mechanisms by which social support benefits adolescents.

In an extension to social support theory, Colvin, Cullen, and Vander Ven (2002) argued that there is a nuanced relationship between the social supports that prevent crime and the coercive forces that compel (or intimidate) an individual to act out of fear or anxiety. Whereas chronic coercive experiences lead to high levels of mental health problems, erratic coercive experiences lead to a propensity for chronic criminality. Social support, however, can also be erratic. Erratic support means that the individual cannot depend or rely on support, and this unpredictability can have negative behavioral consequences. This is particularly the case if the individual compensates by drawing on illegitimate sources of support. Finally, consistent social support has multiple benefits, including promoting self-control, low levels of anger, and strong social bonds, which in turn contribute to prosocial behavior and fewer problems with mental health and criminal behavior. Although research is limited, evidence suggests that the forces of coercion and support are involved in juvenile offending.

Across the life course, social support can reduce the risk for criminal involvement. Support can also increase the likelihood that individuals who have engaged in crime will exit from a criminal pathway, which has implications for social and interpersonal efforts to address criminal behavior. Cullen asserted that punishments that serve to

isolate people from general society fracture existing supports and disrupt the potential for future sources of support, ultimately doing little to prevent recidivism. Rather, social support theory affirms the value of rehabilitation and restorative justice.

Cullen, Wright, and Chamlin (1999) outlined several policy implications of social support theory, emphasizing interventions directed at juveniles. First, early intervention programs designed to support at-risk children, their parents, and their families reduce the chances that those children will escalate into more serious or long-term problem behaviors. Second, social support theory speaks to the value of community-based programs that serve at-risk youths. These programs – including a combination of state and nonprofit efforts, both secular and faith based in organization – are designed, in part, to provide interpersonal support to young people from prosocial adults, connect youth with positive social networks, and help youth build social, emotional, and academic skills. Such programs also serve as community resources.

Third, within the justice system, reinvesting in those practices aimed at rehabilitating offenders is consistent with social support theory. These practices include programs for developing interpersonal and coping skills, counseling from caring providers, mentoring from prosocial people, and maintaining connection to the community. Research also suggests that juvenile reentry initiatives that provide support to juveniles and their families, in addition to fostering supportive relationships among youth and their parents, are important to limiting recidivism.

Finally, social support theory points the way to social and cultural reforms~ Policies that invest in the instrumental and informational needs and overall well-being of individuals, families, and communities are likely to have incremental but cumulative effects on both individual offending and rates of crime. In addition, encouraging altruism, volunteerism, and charitability as important cultural values is also likely to reduce the impact of the social conditions that contribute to crime and delinquency.

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