

Examining the Impact of the Social Bond for Serious and Violent  
Young Offenders

by

Melanie Boudreau

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## Abstract

Hirschi's social bonding theory suggests that weak or broken social bonds increase an individual's likelihood of involvement in delinquent or criminal behavior. The social bond consists of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. By using data from *The Survey of Young Offenders' Perceptions of Sentences: An Empirical Evaluation of a Perception Model and its Linkage to Subsequent Official Offending*, this thesis assesses the explanatory power of social bonding theory with a sample of 150 incarcerated young offenders. Cronbach's alpha reliability measure indicates that three of the six constructs are reliable for the entire sample, namely attachment to parents, attachment to peers, and commitment to conventional lines of action. In addition to these three constructs attachment to school is reliable for the Aboriginal youth in the sample. The remaining constructs of involvement and belief were dropped from further analysis due to unacceptably low reliability coefficient scores. Results of bivariate correlations suggest that the commitment variable and the attachment to one's father variable positively correlate with offence seriousness. No relationship was discovered between attachment to mothers, attachment to delinquent peers, attachment to school, and the seriousness of the current offence. When controlling for gender and ethnicity, the findings show no considerable variation in social bonding as related to offence seriousness among the sub-groups. This thesis also discusses implications for the further theoretical development of social bonding theory, new directions for additional research, and policy implications regarding the prevention of youthful offending.

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## Introduction

In Canada over the last decade, media reports and public concern about youth crime and serious and violent young offending, has increased dramatically. This has made young offending one of the fundamental social problems concerning researchers, policy makers, and criminal justice agents (Bala, 1997; Corrado, Cohen, & Odgers, 2001; Winterdyk, 2000). While the official rate of youth crime has remained relatively stable over this period, official statistics suggest that the percentage of violent offences committed by youth has increased by 77% (Statistics Canada, 1999). Of significant concern is the finding that official offending by female youth has escalated by 127% (Statistics Canada, 1999). In addition to these increases, policy makers, researchers, and criminal justice agents are becoming acutely aware of the significant over-representation of Aboriginal youth in the criminal justice system (Fisher & Jantti, 2000). For example, while Aboriginal youth comprised only 3.8% of the population in British Columbia in 1996, they made up 20% of the youth incarcerated population (Fisher & Jantti, 2000). The increase in the number of violent offences committed by youth, the rise in female youth crime, and the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in Canadian youth custody centers has lead academics, researchers, and policy makers to ask important questions about the relationship between protective factors and risks factors to serious and violent young offending, and what can be done to prevent youth crime and to rehabilitate youthful offenders.

Although a wide range of research has been conducted on the issue of young offending, there is still no consensus among researchers about why youth become involved in criminal and/or deviant behavior (Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Knight &

Tripodi, 1996). However, research demonstrates that there are certain protective factors that may effect whether a youth becomes involved in crime (Bala, 1997, Statistics Canada, 1999). While social factors, such as positive relationships with family and friends, and the ability to adapt to school, are some of the more commonly cited protective factors, little research has been conducted on Canada's most serious and violent young offenders in these domains (Statistics Canada, 1999). In order to implement effective criminal justice policies and programs, it is imperative to explore how these social protective factors relate to youth involvement in criminal behavior.

One of the more dominant theories focusing on sociological protective factors and their relationship to youth crime and delinquency is Travis Hirschi's social bonding theory, which he first presented in *Causes of Delinquency* (1969). Today, social bonding theory remains one of the more influential theories of juvenile crime and delinquency (Akers, 1997; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Greenberg, 1999; Hawdon, 1999; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 1995; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999). Hirschi's theory focuses on the individual's development of the social bond during childhood. The theory is based on the premise that all individuals are inherently motivated to commit crime and will do so unless they form a significantly strong bond to society. For Hirschi, the social bond is comprised of four main elements: (1) attachment to significant others; (2) commitment to conventional lines of action; (3) involvement in conventional activities; and (4) belief in society's normative system. Accordingly, individuals who fail to form a social bond, or whose bond becomes weak or broken, are free to engage in delinquent or criminal activities (Hirschi, 1969).

In disseminating his perspective, Hirschi presented both the theoretical model of the social bond and provided supporting empirical research. In response, several empirical tests by other criminologists and sociologists ensued in an attempt to replicate and establish the fundamental principles of social bonding theory. These efforts conclude that social bonding theory is underdeveloped in some significant areas and in need of refinement (Agnew, 1991; Alarid, Burton, & Francis, 2000; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 1999; Brenda, 1997; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Greenberg, 1999; Hawdon, 1999; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Le Blanc, 1997; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Rosenbaum, 1987; Salts, Lindholm, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994; Wade & Brannigan, 1998; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999). The majority of these researchers have proposed various techniques to improve the methods and/or indicators used to assess social bonding theory (Leonard & Decker, 1994). Following in this tradition, in this thesis, I identify several key gaps and inconsistencies in social bonding theory, and extend Hirschi's theoretical model to three increasingly important areas: serious and violent young offenders, female young offenders, and Aboriginal young offenders. As mentioned previously, these groups are of increasing concern to the general public, policy makers, researchers, and criminal justice agents, and pose significant challenges for social bonding theory.

As presented by Hirschi, social bonding theory primarily focuses on explaining youth involvement in delinquent behavior. As such, concerns have been raised about the

adequacy of social bonding theory to explain more serious youthful offending, and the offending of female and non-white samples (Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995). Due to its over-reliance on explaining delinquency, few empirical studies have tested the theory's explanatory power for official crime and serious and violent young offending (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 1999; Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Le Blanc, 1997; Rosenbaum, 1987; Salts, Lindholm, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Sommers & Baskin, 1994; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dodder, 1984). It is both important and necessary to test social bonding theory on a variety of different samples of offenders in order for this theory to be considered a general theory of crime and to be useful in understanding, responding to, and preventing more serious and violent youthful offending.

Examining Hirschi's theory in relation to female young offenders is important because social bonding theory has typically been designed, tested, and applied exclusively to males.<sup>1</sup> In the development of the social bonding model, Hirschi does not examine the role of gender. The empirical research on social bonding that followed Hirschi's has also failed to apply consistently social bonding theory to females, or to find comparable results for the role of gender differences in the development and maintenance of the social bond (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Cernkovich & Giordanao, 1992; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1987; Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz,

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<sup>1</sup> A common criticism leveled against dominant criminological theories is that they fail to include females in their model development and testing, a criticism exemplified by social bonding theory.

1990; Sommers & Baskin, 1994; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984). This is a significant shortcoming because there exists a well-established body of literature demonstrating the unique socialization and role expectations that males and females experience. As the variation in these processes results in many of the differences observed in male and female development, it is possible that this also results in the social bonding model operating differently for males and females (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988). As such, it is imperative to continue the research into the social bond and gender to ensure that this theory is indeed generalizable to females.

With respect to the issue of Aboriginal young offenders, Hirschi presents social bonding theory as being equally applicable across all racial and ethnic boundaries (Junger & Marshall, 1997). However, Hirschi does not adequately evaluate this assumption, as his research is based predominately on a sample of white adolescent male students (Kempf, 1993). Although current research on social bonding theory is beginning to consider the role of race and ethnicity in the development and maintenance of the social bond (Cernkovich & Giodano, 1992; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Lotz & Lee, 1999), only one study has assessed this association on a sample of Aboriginal youth (Silverman, Nakhaie, & Lagrange, 2000). This type of research is crucial because of the aforementioned over-representation of Aboriginal youth in the Canadian criminal justice system. Given the Canadian context of my research, and the general dearth of empirical research on this issue, social bonding theory is applied to Aboriginal young offenders in this thesis.

Due to these fundamental limitations in Hirschi's theory, this thesis expands the empirical research on social bonding by examining the impact of the bond on a sample of

150 young offenders, while controlling for race and gender. Indeed, serious and/or violent offenders of a variety of races, both male and female, warrant empirical attention in order to adequately evaluate the explanatory power and generalizability of social bonding theory. The general hypothesis tested in this thesis is that the more serious and violent young offenders will have a higher frequency of weak or broken social bonds, when compared to the less serious and violent young offenders.

In Chapter One, I outline social bonding theory as presented by Hirschi. This analysis of social bonding theory involves an exploration of the underlying assumptions of the theory, the four main constructs that comprise the social bond, the indicators used by Hirschi to assess the various elements of the bond, and Hirschi's research findings. In Chapter Two, I examine the empirical research on social bonding theory to include an analysis of the domains of deviance, gender, race and ethnicity, age, psychological factors, delinquent influences, and religion. This review also provides suggestions for theoretical improvements that have emerged from the literature and research on social bonding theory.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my specific hypotheses and the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Specifically, this chapter discusses the sampling procedures, the research and methodological approach that guided the data collection and analysis, the instruments used to gather the data, the nominal and operational definitions used for the dependent and independent variables, and a discussion of the techniques used to prepare and interpret the data.

In Chapter Four, I present the research findings. Specifically, I analyze the sample's characteristics in terms of gender, race, and age distribution. I outline the



sample's educational profiles, substance abuse history, physical and sexual abuse history, family characteristics, and offending profiles. Moreover, the reliability of the constructs and sub-constructs of the social bond are explored. In order to achieve the main objective of this thesis, the explanatory power of each aspect of the social bond for the more serious and violent young offenders is assessed, with a particular emphasis on the effects of gender and ethnicity.

In Chapter Five, I argue that Hirschi's previously determined sociological predictors of general delinquency are, for the most part, not useful predictors of offence seriousness. Based on the research findings, I suggest that factors, such as impulsive behavior and attachment to criminal sub-cultures may be better predictors of youth involvement in more serious offences. The impact of the research findings and their policy implications for young offenders is also discussed. Finally, I identify the implications for the further theoretical development of social bonding theory and new directions for additional research.

## **Chapter One: Hirschi's Social Bonding Theory**

Since its introduction in 1969, social bonding theory has remained one of the more influential theories of crime and delinquency (Akers, 1997; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Hawdon, 1999; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Lilly, Cullen, & Bull, 1995; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999). Social bonding theory's continued acceptance and application is based, in large part, on the fact that its key concepts can be directly tested, and because its constructs are reliable, logical, and parsimonious (Akers, 1997; Leonard & Decker, 1994). In order to understand social bonding theory, and its relevance for serious and violent young offenders, female young offenders, and Aboriginal young offenders, it is necessary to discuss the theory's central concepts. This chapter provides an analysis of social bonding theory's underlying assumptions, the key elements of the social bond (attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief), the nominal definitions of each element, the indicators employed by Hirschi to assess the constructs, and Hirschi's general research findings.

### **Underlying Assumptions**

Hirschi's theory focuses on how various socialization methods affect the development of one's social bond and their involvement in criminal or delinquent behavior. Social bonding theory is classified as a sociological theory as it attempts to explain the process by which delinquency occurs (Einstader & Henry, 1995; Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 1995). Hirschi's theoretical ideas derive from classical criminology and sociology, and he takes the position that human beings are rational decision-makers

guided by the principles of striving to maximize pleasure while avoiding or reducing pain. In addition to the principles of classical criminology, Hirschi was also influenced by the perspectives of Durkheim and Hobbes. Durkheim's ideas of how the power of social regulation fosters conformity and Hobbes' belief that there exists a social imperative on individuals to create community and to abide by socially constructed norms are key underlying themes in Hirschi's social bonding theory (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 1995). In his attempt to understand and explain conforming behavior, Hirschi begins from the perspective that conformity is not something that is inherent in individuals. Instead, Hirschi argues that individuals are born without bonds to society and, as a result, are disposed to deviate. In fact, Hirschi posits that individuals will deviate unless they form a strong social bond that acts to connect them to prosocial attitudes, values, and beliefs. For Hirschi (1969), since individuals are born without a sense of morality, but must develop morals through socialization, deviance is the natural state of people. As such, the question for Hirschi is not why youth engage in delinquency, but why do youth not commit crime? It is these fundamental precepts and a desire to explain the development of conforming behavior in youth that form the foundation of social bonding theory.

The central premise of social bonding theory is that conformity results when an individual develops bonds to a conventional or prosocial society. Hirschi's challenge was to identify the elements that foster the development and internalization of these prosocial or conventional attitudes, values, and beliefs. Hirschi begins with the assertion that the development of the social bond is a process whereby youth internalize prosocial values and learn how to gain access to legitimate social roles (Hirschi, 1969). This process begins in childhood, where individuals either form or fail to form their social bond, and

continues throughout the individual's life. In this way, the process of developing the social bond occurs differently for each individual, occurs at different stages in a youth's life, varies in intensity, and is not necessarily stable over time. As such, for Hirschi, by the time a youth enters adolescence, their social bond is formed, however, the strength of the social bond varies between individuals and it is not static. Moreover, Hirschi discounts the influence of motivational factors, such as increased financial status, as necessary for understanding and addressing delinquency. Rather, it is only the presence, absence, or relative strength of the social bond that is required for explaining youthful offending behavior (Hirschi, 1969).

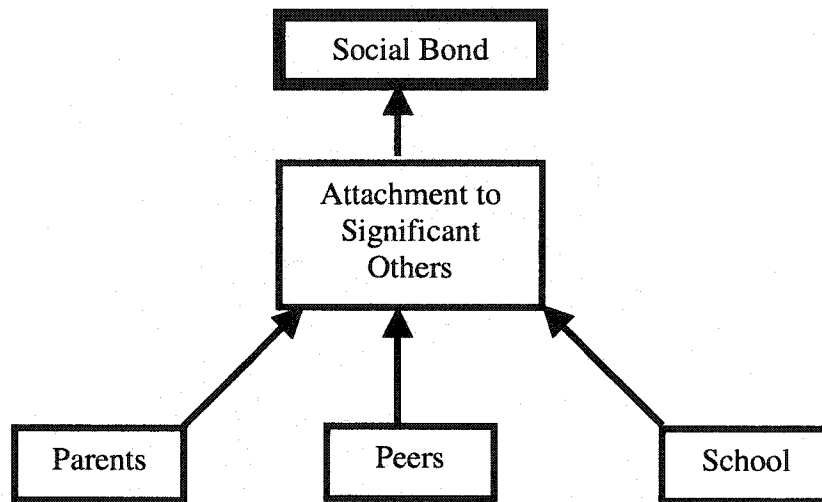
According to Hirschi (1969), the social bond is produced by four key constructs: attachment to significant others; commitment to conventional behavior; involvement in conventional activities; and belief in society's normative system. Each of these variables operates independently, but relative to each other, to create the social bond. In other words, while each element is created, maintained, and functions independently, a change in one element can influence or effect a change in the other elements. In this way, each aspect of the social bond acts as a restraint against engaging in delinquent behavior.

### **Attachment to Significant Others**

Attachment to significant others is the most important element of the social bond (Hirschi, 1969; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993). For Hirschi, a strong attachment to others, such as parents, peers, and/or teachers, functions to prevent an individual from engaging in delinquent activities. This occurs because the individual cares about and is sensitive to the opinions and expectations of their parents, peers, and/or teachers (Hirschi, 1969; Kempf, 1993; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993). According to Hirschi, the likelihood of

delinquent behavior decreases as an individual's attachment to significant others increases. The most important people and institutions in forming prosocial attachment are parents, peers, and the school.

Figure 1: The Social Bond – Attachment to Significant Others



### **Attachment to Parents**

For Hirschi (1969), there are three major dimensions for measuring attachment to parents: (1) the psychological hold that parents have on youth, also known as virtual supervision; (2) the intimacy of communication between parent and child, also known as shared communication; and (3) the youth's affectional identification with their parents. Psychological presence, or the hold of parents, involves the youth's perception that their parents are aware of what they are doing and who they are with at any given time. For Hirschi, psychological presence prevents youth from engaging in delinquent behavior because they are concerned about their parent's potential negative reaction to their

behavior. To measure this item, Hirschi asks the youth a series of questions evaluating the degree to which they feel that their parents are aware of their activities, location, and associations. Specifically, Hirschi asks the following questions: "Does your mother (father) know where you are when you are away from home?" and "Does your mother (father) know whom you are with when you are away from home?" (Hirschi, 1969: 88-89).

The second element of attachment to parents is shared communication between the parent and youth. This concept reflects the youth's willingness to share their thoughts, feelings, and plans for the future with their parents (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi's assumption is that the more communication between youth and parents, the more value the youth will place on their parents' opinions, and the less the youth will want to undermine those expectations by engaging in delinquent or criminal behavior. Hirschi assesses this element of the bond through the following questions: "Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your mother (father)?" and "How often have you talked over your future plans with you mother (father)?" (Hirschi, 1969: 90). Shared communication also involves the parent's willingness to discuss situations with the youth and share their feelings toward the youth (Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993). To evaluate this dimension of the social bond, Hirschi asks: "When you don't know why your mother (father) makes a rule, will she (he) explain the reason?", "When you come across things you don't understand, does your mother (father) help you with them?", and "Does your mother (father) ever explain why she (he) feels the way she does?" (Hirschi, 1969: 90).

The final dimension of attachment to parents is affectional identification. This element deals with the youth's feelings of love or respect for their parents. Hirschi

hypothesizes that youth who love and respect their parents are less likely to become involved in delinquent behavior because they do not want to disappoint or disrespect them. That is, the potential reaction of the parents to delinquent behavior is important enough to act as a deterrent. Hirschi measures affectional identification with the following question: "Would you like to be the kind of person your father (mother) is?" (Hirschi, 1969: 92). Overall, Hirschi suggests that youth who are attached to their parents are more likely than unattached youth to internalize their parents' expectations, and are more likely to be successfully socialized to the legal and social norms of society.

### **Attachment to Peers**

Another key element in attachment to significant others is attachment to peers. Hirschi examines the effect of both attachment to delinquent peers and attachment to pro-social peers. In doing so, Hirschi deviates from the tradition of other theories of crime, such as Cohen's (1955) sub-cultural theory and Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association. These theories suggest that the number of delinquent friends a youth has, and the frequency and quality of their contacts, increases their potential exposure to criminal influences. In this way, associating with delinquent peers is positively related to involvement in deviance. However, Hirschi hypothesizes that in order to develop a strong social bond characterized by conformity to conventional rules, it is sufficient to associate with peers, regardless of the character or behavior of the peer group. "We honor those we admire not by imitation, but by adherence to conventional standards" (Hirschi, 1969: 152). To test this assumption, Hirschi defines delinquent peers as those who have had contact with agents of the criminal justice system and asks youth: "Have any of your

friends ever been picked up by the police” and “How much do you think most teachers like the group of friends you go with?” (Hirschi, 1969: 136, 147).

Similar to attachment to parents, an important dimension of attachment to peers involves the youth’s affectional identification with, and respect for, the opinions of their friends, and the potential negative reaction of the youth’s friends to his or her delinquent behavior (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi hypothesizes that the more youth respect and value the opinions of their friends, the less likely they are to behave in ways that would damage their friendships. In this way, having a strong attachment to peers acts as a protective factor against delinquency. Hirschi measures this dimension by asking: “Would you like to be the kind of person your best friends are?”, “Do you respect your best friend’s opinions about the important things in life?”, and “What would be the worst thing about getting caught for stealing?” with a choice between “Your parents would be angry” and “Your friends would look down on you” (Hirschi, 1969: 142-149).

### **Attachment to School**

Another important element in the development of an attachment to conventional others is attachment to school. Attachment to school is significant because it fosters a bond to prosocial and conventional institutions. This is important because bonding to a conventional institution results in an acceptance of prosocial values. An assessment of a youth’s attachment to school is based on the youth’s attitudes toward educational institutions, academic ability and performance, self-perceived academic competence, concern and regard for their teachers’ opinions, and an acceptance of the school’s authority (Akers, 1997; Hirschi, 1969; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993). Hirschi suggests that the “causal chain [of attachment to school] runs from academic incompetence to poor



school performance to disliking of school to rejection of the school authority to the commission of delinquent acts” (Hirschi, 1969: 132).

Hirschi hypothesizes that negative attitudes towards school are related to an increased risk for delinquency because engaging in delinquency may serve to alleviate some of the frustration caused by a negative school experience. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, Hirschi asks youth the following question: “In general, do you like or dislike school?” (Hirschi, 1969: 121). In addition to this general assessment of a youth’s attitude towards school, Hirschi suggests that another important component of attachment to school is academic ability and performance. This element focuses on the youth’s level of academic success. For Hirschi, youth who experience poor academic performance and engage in delinquent behavior have less serious social consequences associated with that behavior when compared to academically competent youth because their ties to prosocial people and conventional society are weak. To measure academic incompetence, the youth’s performance on a differential aptitude test and their average grades in English and mathematics are assessed (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi’s decision to select these items to measure academic competence was because grade point averages were not available to him for review.

The third element of attachment to school is self-perceived academic competence. For Hirschi, youth who hold a positive attitude about their ability to succeed in school are less likely to commit delinquent acts. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that those youth who have a positive attitude about their ability to succeed in school are more likely to enjoy school and find it relevant to the future. Hirschi assesses this item by asking youth: “What grades are you capable of getting?” (Hirschi, 1969: 118). Another

aspect of attachment to school reflects a concern for the opinion of teachers. Hirschi hypothesizes that the less a youth cares about their teachers' opinion of them, the more likely they are to become involved in delinquent activities. This hypothesis is based on Hirschi's belief in a relationship between delinquency and rejection of middle-class values. For Hirschi, youth who reject middle-class values are less concerned about society's reaction to their deviant behavior. A significant representative of middle-class values in a youth's life are their teachers. In this way, not caring or valuing the opinions of teachers suggests a weak attachment to school and to the middle-class values attached to this institution. To assess this element, Hirschi asks: "Do you care what teachers think of you?" and "Teachers pick on me" (Hirschi, 1969: 123, 126).

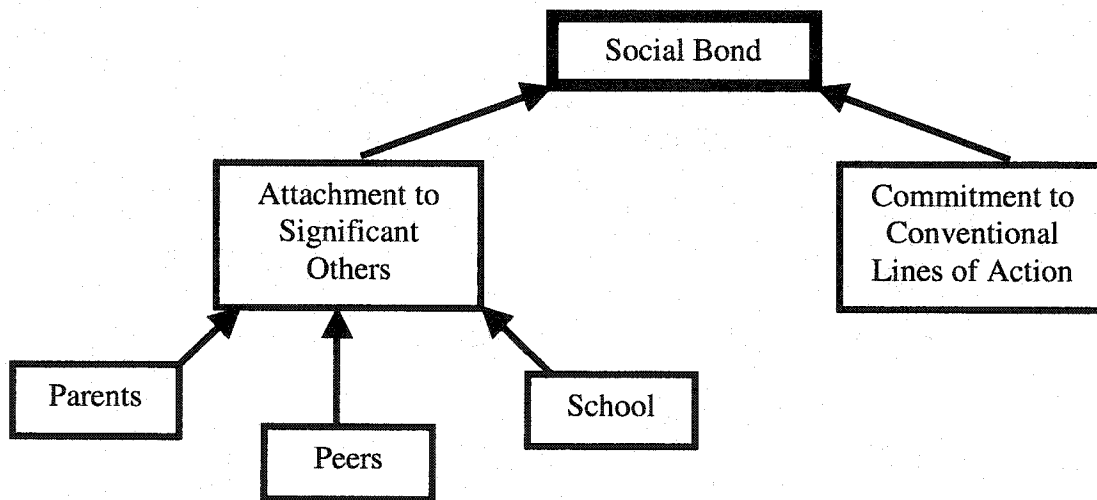
The final element associated with attachment to school is the legitimacy of institutional rules. This element is concerned with a youth's willingness to accept the school's role in establishing rules and controlling the student body (Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993). Hirschi hypothesizes that negative feelings towards the school's authority lead to the denial of the legitimacy of the school to impose and enforce its rules. Hirschi posits that youth who do not believe in the schools authority to create and implement rules also feel that schools have no right to control or sanction behavior. In this way, the youth neutralize their delinquent behavior. To measure this attitude, Hirschi asks: "It is none of the school's business if a student wants to smoke outside of the classroom" (Hirschi, 1969: 128).

### **Commitment to Conventional Lines of Action**

The second main element of the social bond is commitment to conventional lines of action. Commitment involves one's devotion to conventional activities (Hirschi,

1969). According to Hirschi, commitment is the rational element of conforming behavior and refers to an individual's investment of time and energy in prosocial activities, such as education. Similar to rational choice theory (Becker, 1963), Hirschi argues that individuals consider and evaluate the costs associated with committing a deviant or delinquent act before deciding to engage in it. Hirschi maintains that commitment functions as a deterrent against engaging in delinquent behavior because it provides a cost, in terms of current and future social status, that may outweigh any potential benefits associated with delinquent involvement.

Figure 2: The Social Bond – Commitment to Conventional Lines of Action



According to Hirschi (1969), commitment includes three key elements: individual achievement orientation; educational and occupational expectations; and passage into adult status. Achievement orientation refers to the youth's desire to do well in school-related activities. For Hirschi, a concern over academic grades and achievement reflect

this orientation and serve to strengthen the social bond. Based on the principle of commitment, Hirschi hypothesizes that youth do not want to jeopardize their academic investments by engaging in delinquent behavior. To measure achievement orientation, Hirschi asks: "How important are getting good grades to you personally?", "Whatever I do, I try hard", and "I try hard at school" (Hirschi, 1969: 178).

A second aspect of commitment is educational and employment expectations. This element refers to a youth's desire to achieve middle-class values. Hirschi hypothesizes that this desire increases the strength of the social bond because the youth does not want to risk their future goals and aspirations by engaging in delinquent behavior. Hirschi measures the youth's educational and employment expectations by asking: "How much schooling would you like to get eventually?", "How much education do you expect to get?", "Do your parents want you to go to college?", "Which of these jobs comes closest to describing the type of job you want eventually?", "Which of these jobs comes closest to describing the job you really expect to have eventually?", and "Do you think that either your competence or racial discrimination will keep you from getting the kind of job you want to have eventually?" (Hirschi, 1969: 171, 177, 187, 267). To assess education and employment expectations, Hirschi asks: "The only reason to have a job is for money", "You should not expect too much out of life", and "An easy life is a happy life" (Hirschi, 1969: 180-181).

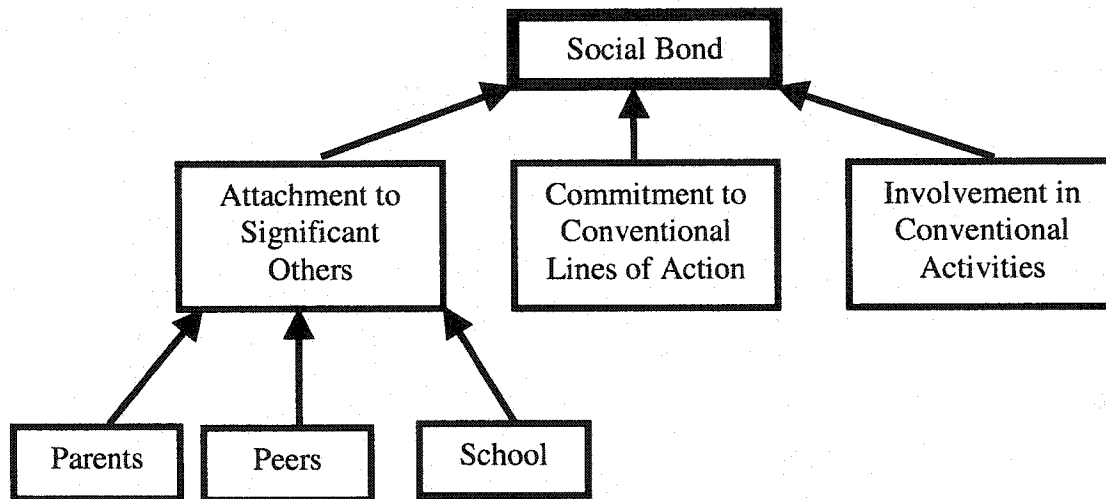
The final element of commitment is passage into adult status. According to Hirschi, passage into adult status is the negative dimension of commitment. In other words, the more a youth is committed to "adult-type" behaviors, the weaker their commitment to conventional lines of action. For Hirschi, youth who engage in adult

activities are likely to become involved in delinquent behavior because, as a youth, they can enjoy the “privileges of adulthood without being burdened” by adult responsibilities, such as work or family (Hirschi, 1969: 163). This dimension assesses the youth’s investment of time engaging in adult-like activities, such as smoking, drinking, driving, and dating. As well, this dimension is interested in the age of onset for involvement with these types of activities (Hirschi, 1969). To assess passage into adult status, Hirschi asks: ““Do you smoke cigarettes?”, “How important is having a car?”, “Do you own a car?”, “Do you drive a car you don’t own?”, “Do you drink beer, wine, or liquor away from home?”, “Do you date?”, and “What period of your life do you think will turn out to be the happiest part of your life?” (Hirschi, 1969: 164, 167-169, 259).

### **Involvement in Conventional Activities**

The third element of social bonding is involvement in conventional activities. This aspect of the social bond focuses on the pre-occupation with behaviors that represent the conventional interests of society, such as time spent doing homework (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi hypothesizes that the more one is involved in conventional prosocial activities, the less time they have to engage in deviant behavior. For Hirschi, involvement in conventional activities is the behavioral portion of the element of commitment.

Figure 3: The Social Bond – Involvement in Conventional Activities



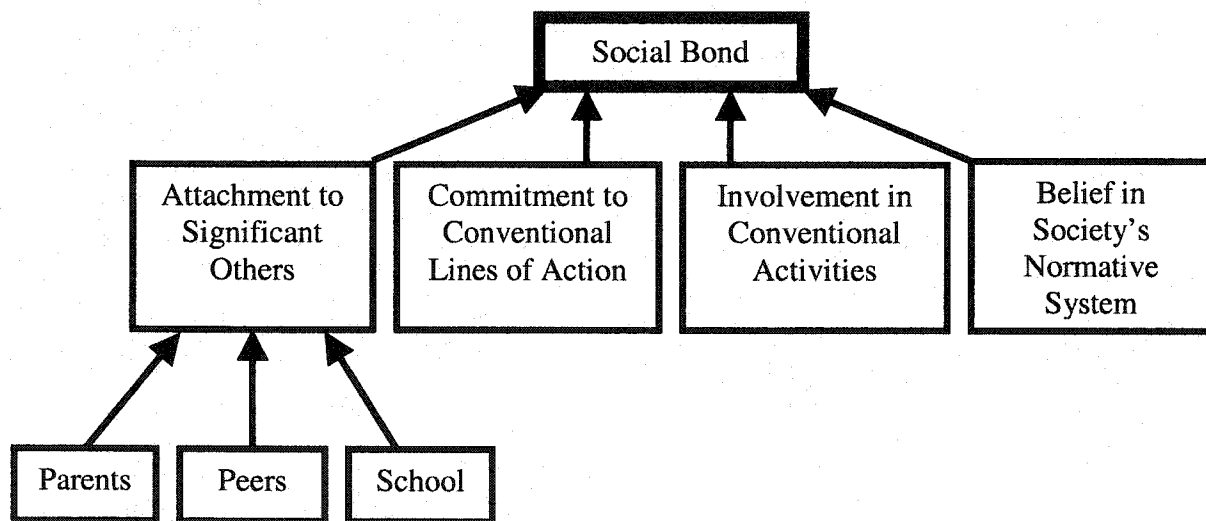
Hirschi (1969) assesses involvement in conventional activities by determining the amount of time a youth invests in school related activities, whether or not the youth is employed, and the amount of time a youth devotes to their friends. To measure involvement, Hirschi asks: “On average, how many hours a week do you work for pay now, while you are attending school?”, “On average, how much time do you spend doing homework outside of school?”, “Do you ever feel that there’s nothing to do?” “How many hours a week do you spend riding around in car”, and “How many hours do spend talking with friends?” (Hirschi, 1969:193-195, 251, 273).

### **Belief in Society’s Normative System**

Belief in society’s normative system is the final element of the social bond. This element refers to one’s acceptance of a common value system within society (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi maintains that delinquents are aware that their behavior is wrong, but they simply feel that there are no moral obstacles when it comes to law violation. In other words, people who do not have respect for society’s rules feel no obligation to abide by

them. If the “allegiance to a belief system has not been developed, or if those ties are weakened .... the individual is then free to behave without regard to that belief system” (Wiatrowski, 1978: 36). As such, Hirschi hypothesizes that the extent to which one has respect for people in positions of authority, for society’s normative system, and feel a moral obligation to conform to society’s norms, the less likely they are to become involved in delinquent behavior.

Figure 4: The Social Bond – Belief in Society’s Normative System



Accordingly, the belief element of the social bond is measured by one’s attitude to the law and the legal system, and the degree to which one is concerned about the approval of people in positions of authority. In order to measure the element of belief, Hirschi asks: “I have a lot of respect for the Richmond police” and “It is alright to get around the law if you can get away with it” (Hirschi, 1969: 201, 203).

Hirschi contends that another important aspect of belief in society's normative system is the degree to which one has developed, internalized, and employs techniques of neutralization. According to Sykes and Matza (1957), people create a variety of justifications and rationalizations for their behavior. These techniques allow the individual to minimize the seriousness of their behavior and/or its associated outcomes. For Hirschi, techniques of neutralization involve a youth's tendency to minimize the effects of criminal activity or delinquency. In order to assess this element, Hirschi asks: "Most criminals shouldn't really be blamed for the things they have done", "I can't seem to stay out of trouble no matter how hard I try", "Most things that people call 'delinquency' don't really hurt anyone", "The man who leaves the keys in his car is as much to blame for its theft as the man who steals it", "Policemen try to give all kids an even break", and "Suckers deserve to be taken advantage of" (Hirschi, 1969: 206-210).

The final dimension of belief in society's normative system is fatalism. Fatalism refers to a complete denial of responsibility for one's behavior. Hirschi hypothesizes that fatalism is indicative of delinquency because it reflects a rejection of the conventional society's norms, beliefs, and practices, all of which are essential elements for conforming behavior. To assess fatalism, Hirschi asks: "What is going to happen to me will happen, no matter what I do", "There is no sense looking ahead since no one knows what the future will be like", and "A person should live for today and let tomorrow take care of itself" (Hirschi, 1969: 222).

### **Hirschi's Research Findings**

Hirschi's (1969) model proposes that individuals who fail to form a strong social bond, or whose bond becomes weak or broken, are likely to engage in delinquent



activities. To test this model, Hirschi uses data from the Richmond Youth Project. For his empirical evaluation, Hirschi uses a stratified random sample of 3,605 primarily Caucasian adolescent male students. He reviews each subject's school records, police records, and each of the subject's completed self-report survey. Using tabular analysis, Hirschi validates his social bonding model as a protective factor against youth involvement in crime and delinquency.

Hirschi hypothesizes that the constructs comprising the social bond are independent and negatively related to the youth's involvement in delinquent behavior. Hirschi also suggests that the elements of the social bond are inter-correlated. In other words, as one construct weakens, so do the other constructs. Although Hirschi does not empirically assess how the elements of the bond might simultaneously affect delinquency, his study demonstrates support for the hypothesis that the elements of the social bond, with the exception of involvement, co-vary with the incidence of delinquency. As such, the weaker the elements of the social bond, the higher the likelihood of the youth's involvement in delinquent behavior (Hirschi, 1969). Another unexpected finding is that the likelihood of youth being involved in delinquent behavior is most strongly related to their involvement with delinquent peers. Based on this finding, Hirschi revised his theory to suggest that it is not one's association with peers that promotes conformity to conventional attitudes, values, beliefs, and institutions, but one's attachment to prosocial peers. Hirschi also concludes that a low social bond promotes and enhances a youth's choice in associating with delinquent companions, rather than the belief that delinquent companions negatively affect the strength of a youth's social bond. In this way, youth with a weak social bond are drawn to delinquent peers.

## **Conclusion**

Hirschi's social bonding model provides a new direction for control theories of crime by introducing several important concepts for understanding why some youth engage in delinquency. Not only does Hirschi provide a theoretical explanation for delinquency, but he also empirically tested his theory. Hirschi argues that the social bond, composed of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, protects youth from delinquency. Specifically, Hirschi contends that the stronger the social bond, the less likely one is to engage in delinquent behavior. This approach to understanding delinquency still remains extremely popular and has lead many theorists and researchers to consider and evaluate Hirschi's original work. In the next chapter, I present the research on social bonding theory and identify some of the key limitations in the research literature.

## **Chapter Two: Empirical Research on Social Bonding Theory**

In response to Hirschi's social bonding model, many empirical tests have been undertaken in an attempt to validate his hypotheses (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 1999; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hawdon, 1999; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Le Blanc, 1997; Le Blanc & Caplan, 1993; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Mak, 1990; Rosenbaum, 1987; Salts, Lindholm, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994; Wade & Brannigan, 1998; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999). Even with the enormous attention given to this theoretical model, some, including Hirschi himself, suggest that social bonding theory suffers from under-development and requires refinement. This chapter provides a review of the empirical research conducted on social bonding theory, with a focus on the literature and research associated with deviance, gender, race, age, psychological factors, delinquent peers, and religion.

### **Domains of Deviance**

Although Hirschi reserves his testing of social bonding theory to self-reported juvenile delinquency, domains of deviance, other than delinquency, have also been researched. These analyses include, but are not limited to, studies of drug and alcohol use, adult crime, sexual behavior, official offending, and mental health disorders (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Le Blanc, 1997; Rosenbaum, 1987; Sommers & Baskin, 1994). Although these analyses have expanded our understanding of the social bonding model by applying it to

a variety of deviant and criminal behaviors, criticisms remain as only a few studies have examined “truly offensive delinquency” (Kempf, 1993: 144). In other words, there is a paucity of research on social bonding theory and serious and/or violent offenders. For this reason, concerns have been raised about the adequacy and explanatory power of social bonding theory for official crime in general and serious and violent offending specifically (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 1999; Kempf, 1993; Knight & Tripodi, 1996; Le Blanc, 1997; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Rosenbaum, 1987; Salts, Lindholm, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Sommers & Baskin, 1994; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dodder, 1984).

Of the limited research assessing the impact of the social bond on detained youth populations and/or serious and violent behavior, the results have been inconclusive.<sup>1</sup> For example, using a sample of 3,810 male and female 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, Bernburg and Thorlindsson (1999) assessed the relationship between parental attachment, commitment to school, belief in society’s normative system, and violent behavior and delinquency. Their findings support the argument that aspects of social bonding suggest that a weak bond is related to violence in much the same way as delinquency. In other words, “violence is part of a general sub-culture of delinquency” (Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 1999: 445). Similarly, through the use of interviews with a sample of 85 women who had previously been arrested for violent criminal offences, Sommers and Baskin (1994) assess factors related to female involvement in violent crime. They found that weak school attachment is a factor related to the involvement in street violence. This finding is

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<sup>1</sup> Kempf’s (1993) review of over seventy studies of the social bond uncovered only three studies conducted with a sample of official young or adult offenders.

important because it suggests that a weak social bond as a youth may affect the likelihood of becoming involved in violent behavior as an adult. Additional support for the application of social bonding theory to violent behavior is demonstrated in Salts, Bryon, Goddard, & Duncan's (1995) study of violent offending behavior on a sample of 3,761 high school students. Their findings provide further support for the conclusion that a weak attachment to parents and school is related to youth involvement in violent crime. For them, youth with weak or broken bonds are more likely than their counterparts to become involved in violent behavior (Salts, Bryon, Goddard, & Duncan, 1995). Similarly, Alarid, Burton, and Cullen (2000) examine the effects of marital attachment, parental attachment, attachment to friends, involvement, and belief in a sample of 1,153 incarcerated male and female adult felons. They argue that, with the exception of involvement, social bonding theory explains self-reported offending for various types of crime, including violent offences. This is an important finding because it suggests that childhood bonds may effect behavior into adulthood.

In contrast to the above research findings, Rosenbaum's (1987) study of 1,612 students and delinquent youth aged 15 to 18 discovered that social bonding variables did not account for youth involvement in violent behavior, but did explain involvement in delinquent behavior. This study suggests that something other than a weak social bond may influence youth involvement in violent behavior. Rosenbaum suggests that the social bond may be irrelevant in these cases because, unlike delinquency, this type of behavior is generally impulsive. As such, since youth may not consider the consequences associated with engaging in violence, the strength or weakness of their social bond becomes irrelevant as a protective factor. Likewise, Knight and Tripodi (1996) assess

parental attachment, attachment to peers, and commitment to school on a sample of 168 detained youth. Their research findings suggest that each of these items positively correlates with the number of official crimes youth have committed. Contradicting the fundamental basis of social bonding theory, Knight and Tripodi (1996) suggest that youth who commit more crimes are more likely to have a strong social bond when compared to their counterparts. Moreover, this finding suggests that the strength of a youth's social bond tends to increase with the number of crimes they commit. Knight and Tripodi explain this finding through the nature of social bonding. They argue that detained youth develop strong social bonds to criminal or delinquent sub-cultures, rather than prosocial ones. To further support this conclusion, Knight and Tripodi indicate that 70% of the sample's parents have been incarcerated.

Friedman and Rosenbaum (1988) studied self-reported offending behavior and the social bond on a sample of 1,708 students from six high schools, and 1,426 student from five middle high schools. Their research reveals that certain components of the social bond explain different types of offending behavior better than others. Friedman and Rosenbaum posit that a lack of attachment to parents predicts substantially more personal offences, including assault and robbery, than property offences, including shoplifting. Moreover, a lack of commitment to school predicted substantially more property offences than personal offences. These finding suggest that certain aspects of the social bond may explain certain types of offending behavior better than others. Moreover, these types of findings have important policy implications for tracing the etiology of serious and violent offending, and for addressing appropriate intervention strategies for different types of

offenders because they may indicate that there are different predictors or protective factors for involvement in violent offending.

Based on this general review of the literature, it is necessary to expand the research on social bonding theory to include serious and/or violent young offenders, or offenders who are detained in youth custody facilities, as they are qualitatively different from delinquent and normative samples. Not only has research failed to evaluate adequately the impact of the social bond on these more serious samples, but, by doing so, research cannot address the fundamental question of whether violent and non-violent behavior have the same predictors, risk factors, and protective factors. The research on social bonding theory has also failed to address adequately other key issues, such as the relationship between social bonding and gender, race, ethnicity, age, psychological factors, delinquent influences, and religion.

### **Gender**

As mentioned in Chapter One, Hirschi's (1969) empirical test of social bonding theory involves a reliance on adolescent male students as respondents. Indeed, Hirschi did not examine the role of gender in delinquency or in the development of the social bond. The literature on social bonding theory suggests, however, that gender is a variable that should be considered as contributing to the social bonding model (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1987; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990). Friedman and Rosenbaum (1988) maintain that it is essential to assess the impact of gender on social bonding because males and females have distinctive socialization processes and role expectations.

Although researchers have begun to apply social bonding theory to females, a review of the empirical studies reveals a failure to consistently apply this theory to female offenders, or to achieve reliably comparable results (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Cernkovich & Giordanao, 1992; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Junger & Marshall, 1997; Kempf, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1987; Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990; Sommers & Baskin, 1994; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984). While a handful of studies reveal that aspects of a strong social bond operate similarly for both genders by inhibiting involvement in delinquent activities (Cernkovich & Giordanao, 1992; Sommers & Baskin, 1994; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984), other research suggests that the social bonding model does not manifest itself in the same way for males and females (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000; Rosenbaum, 1987; Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990).

For example, Sommers and Baskin (1994) assess social bonding variables on a sample of 85 females who were arrested and/or incarcerated for a violent crime. By conducting interviews with these females, they conclude that weak school and parental attachment are key factors related to female involvement in violent crime. Similarly, using self-report surveys, Cernkovich & Giordanao's (1992) research on a neighborhood sample of 942 male (49%) and female (51%) adolescents discovered that school bonding explains the variance in delinquency at comparable levels for both genders. In other words, school bonding has a consistent effect for both genders' involvement in delinquent behavior. Thompson, Mitchell, and Dobber (1984) assess attachment to parents, peers, and school by applying the model to a sample of 724 male (n=322) and



female (n=402) youth from four high schools and one juvenile detention center. This study discovered that attachment to parents, peers, and school is inversely related to delinquency, and in much the same way for both genders. That is, a strong attachment to significant others and attachment to school is negatively related to involvement in delinquent behavior for both male and female subjects.

In contrast to the above noted research findings that support the generalizability of social bonding theory to females, Rosenbaum (1987) conducted a self-report study on a sample of 1,612 youth from three different groups: high school youth with no police or court records; youth with police records, but no court records; and youth with both police and court records. Rosenbaum found that social bonding theory accounts for more female, than male, involvement in drug and property offences. While Rosenbaum's study found that social bonding theory, in general, provides a poor explanation for youth involvement in violent behavior, social bonding did account for an equal amount of violent behavior in males and females. These findings suggest that social bonding theory may explain female involvement in less serious delinquency, but the theory's explanatory power is reduced when applied to more violent behavior. Similarly, using data from the 1972 National Survey of Youth, Seydlitz (1990) assesses parental attachment and delinquency on a sample of 872 youth consisting of 402 females and 470 males. Seydlitz discovered that the effect of gender on attachment to parents varies for different age groups. For example, virtual supervision explains male involvement in delinquency better than females at age 15, and the effect of intimacy of communication on delinquent behavior is greater for females than males at age 18. These finding may indicate that social bonding operates differently for males and females during different developmental

periods. Similarly, Alarid, Burton, and Cullen's (2000) survey research on a sample of 1,153 incarcerated adult felons, including 122 females, suggests that while attachment to parents predicts significantly more female than male involvement in violent offences, it applies equally to male and female involvement in property crime. However, parental attachment does not explain male involvement in drug offences. Friedman and Rosenbaum's (1988) study of 2,926 high school and middle school students further suggests that variation exists between males and females on the impact of the social bond on delinquent behavior. Their research findings reveal that a low commitment to school explains more female than male involvement in shoplifting, and that a weak social bond may be more indicative of female than male involvement in minor crimes, such as shoplifting.

There is also research to suggest that aspects of the social bond better explain male involvement in crime and delinquency. Using data from the Seattle Youth Study, Rosenbaum and Lasley (1990) apply social bonding theory to 1,508 male and female high school youth made up of three groups: those with no police or court records; those with only police records; or those with police and court records. Rosenbaum and Lasley's study suggests that strong attachment and commitment to school explains significantly more conforming behavior in males than in females. They also found that a lack of involvement in conventional activities explains more male than female involvement in criminal or delinquent behavior. These findings indicate that, with respect to their involvement in delinquent behavior, certain aspects of the social bond operate differently for males and females.

A review of the research literature on the role of gender and social bonding reveals that some studies support the generalizability of the theory to both genders, while other research indicates that the theory does not generalize to females. Indeed, research has produced mixed and inconclusive results on the role of gender differences in the level of social bonding and its relationship to delinquent and criminal activities. By virtue of these discrepancies, it is necessary for the issue of gender differences to be explored further in the social bonding research literature.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

Hirschi presented social bonding theory as being equally applicable across all racial and ethnic boundaries (Junger & Marshall, 1997). However, as mentioned previously, Hirschi did not adequately evaluate this assumption. Of the studies that have examined the impact of race and/or ethnic background influences on social bonding variables and delinquency, some have concluded that ethnicity or race is not significant (Junger & Marshall, 1997; Cernkovich & Giodano, 1992), while others have discovered that the theory best explains Caucasian involvement in criminal and/or delinquent behavior (Lotz & Lee, 1999; Silverman, Nakhaie, & Lagrange, 2000).

Junger and Marshall's (1997) research in the Netherlands on a sample of 788 male youth, including Surinamese (n=206), Moroccan (n=182), Turkish (n=196), and Dutch boys (n=206), reveals that the social bond accounts for the variance in self-reported delinquent involvement in the same way among the four ethnic groups. Moreover, Cernkovich and Giordano (1992) conducted interviews with a neighborhood sample of 942 black and white youth. Their assessment of school bonding, delinquency,

and race also discovered that the bonding variables operate similarly for black and white adolescent subjects in its ability to account for involvement in delinquent behavior.

In contrast to the above research findings, Lotz and Lee's (1999) study of school bonding on a sample of 2,772 adolescents discovered that a low attachment and commitment to school predicts involvement in delinquent behavior for white respondents, but does not have the same effect on African American youth. Using a sample of 2,495 junior and senior high school youth, including Aboriginal youth, Silverman, Nakhaie, and Lagrange (2000) suggest that the social bonding model does not account effectively for the differences in delinquency when Aboriginals are compared to youth of other races. Rather, they suggest that factors other than a weak social bond, such as historical marginalization or extreme poverty, explain the differences in criminal involvement between Aboriginal youth and other respondents (Silverman, Nakhaie, & Lagrange, 2000).

The research results on the impact of race and ethnicity on social bonding do not allow for a conclusion to be drawn about its effects. Moreover, with respect to Aboriginal youth, further research is required as there has only been one study conducted on this racial group.

### Age

Hirschi (1969) does not suggest that social bonding variables operate differently for distinct age groups (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988). Numerous studies of social bonding theory, however, empirically demonstrate the importance of considering age in the social bonding model (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; LaGrange & White, 1985; Leonard & Decker, 1994; Samuelson, Hartnagel, & Krahn, 1995; Seydlitz, 1990;

Silverman, Nakhaie, & LaGrange, 2000). For example, Friedman and Rosenbaum maintain that “certain components of the bonding process become more or less effective as deterrents against delinquent activity as the adolescent grows older” (Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988: 365).

Seydlitz’s (1990) and Friedman and Rosenbaum’s (1988) studies of the attachment variable reveal that social bonding operates differently for distinct age categories. Employing data from the National Survey of Youth, Seydlitz (1990) discovered that a low intimacy of communication with parents is significantly better at explaining delinquency for males at age 11 than it is at 18 years old. Moreover, the virtual supervision by parents is a more effective theoretical construct for males at age 15 than at age 11. These findings suggest that the effect of various forms of parental attachment is dependent on the age of the youth. Friedman and Rosenbaum’s (1988) study on a sample of 2,926 middle and high school youth reveals that attachment to parents does not explain youth’s involvement in personal crimes, such as robbery or assault, for youth aged 16 to 18. Additional studies have discovered that peer attachments are more important for older youth, and that the social bonding theory is more useful in explaining delinquency when applied to younger subjects (Kempf, 1993). For instance, LaGrange and White (1985) assessed the impact of the social bond on delinquency for three different age groups, including 12, 15, and 18 year olds. This study found that the social bonding variables were most effective in explaining delinquent involvement among the 15 year old subjects. In addition, Leonard and Decker (1994) examine the effects of all aspects of the social bond on a sample of 1,974 pre-adolescents. They discovered that the elements of the bond operate differently for pre-teens and other

adolescents. More specifically, the model better explains the differences in conforming and non-conforming behavior for adolescents than it does for pre-teens.

The empirical research on the effects of age and social bonding suggest that the elements of the social bond may operate distinctively for various age groups. It is important to determine how effective the various aspects of the social bond are for specific age groups so that future policy development aimed at preventing youth involvement in delinquent behavior can account for the fact that the impact of sociological protective factors vary with age. Indeed, age and its effect on the social bond is an area that warrants further empirical investigation.

### **Psychological Factors**

Although Hirschi's social bonding theory does not include psychological constructs, researchers have recently began to consider the role of psychological factors in offending behavior and in the development of the social bond (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Le Blanc, 1985; Le Blanc, 1997; Silverman, Nakhaie, & Lagrange, 2000; Wright et al., 1999). Gottfredson and Hirschi, for instance, have proposed low self-control as the "individual-level cause of crime" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990: 232). They argue that low self-control is the result of ineffective child rearing and that low self-control is established early in one's life. Moreover, the level of self-control remains stable throughout one's lifetime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Individuals with low self-control are "impulsive, insensible, physical, risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal" (Le Blanc, 1997: 233). In this way, low self-control, in addition to increasing one's propensity to commit crime, may also effect the development of the social bond (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

The majority of research that has empirically tested Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory of low-self control (1990) demonstrate some support for the theoretical model (Brownfield & Sorenson, 1993; Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993). In terms of linking low self-control to social bonding theory, researchers have begun to assess the mediating impact of self-control on the development of social bonds (Mak, 1990; Nagin & Paternoster, 1994; Polakowski, 1994; Silverman, Nakhaie, & LaGrange, 2000; Wright et al, 1999). For instance, using data from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, Wright et al. (1999) tracked the development of self-control and the social bond for a group of 992 individuals from birth to age 21. They found that, when compared to those children with self-control, those with low self-control were more likely to have disrupted social bonds and were also more likely to commit criminal acts later in life. They also discovered that the social bond acts as a mediator between low-self control and criminal involvement. Their research indicates that "self-control had direct ... and indirect effects on crime, and social bonds had net direct effects on crime" (Wright et al., 1999: 503). In other words, low-self control does not necessarily mean that an individual will become involved in criminal or delinquent behavior because a strong social bond can protect against the effects of low-self control, thus reducing the risk of becoming involved in criminal behavior.

Similarly, Silverman, Nakhaie, and LaGrange (2000) use data from the University of Alberta Study of Juvenile and Adolescent Behavior, which involves survey data from a sample of 2,495 secondary school students. They discovered that social bonds alter the effects of self-control on self-reported criminal behavior. Mak's (1990) study of attachment to parents, commitment to school, belief in the law, and personal control on a

sample of 793 secondary school students concludes that the psychosocial model accounts for more self-reported delinquency than the sociological variables alone. In other words, both psychological and sociological factors are useful in understanding self-reported delinquency. Similarly, using offending scenarios, Nagin and Paternoster's (1994) study of 699 undergraduate university students reveals that individuals who are lacking self-control are less likely to develop strong attachments and commitments, and are less deterred from committing crime when compared to those who have self-control. This finding suggests that individuals with low-self control are less likely to invest the necessary time to develop strong prosocial bonds and, therefore, may have less at stake when it comes to deciding to engage in criminal behavior. In much the same way, using interview data from the first six waves of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Polakowski (1994) posits that low self-control is inversely related to the elements of the social bond, and that these elements significantly predict future criminal convictions and self-reported delinquency of subjects. These above noted research findings substantiate the empirical need to continue linking these two models of control theory together.

Le Blanc (1997) has explored the psychological constructs of allocentrism in relation to the social bond and youth crime. According to Le Blanc, allocentrism is defined as being opposite to the natural egocentrism of individuals:

The egocentric personality has five distinguishing traits: interpersonal isolation (little association with others), hyposociability (inability to cope with the demands and constraints of social life), negativeness (hostile attitude towards others), insecurity (malaise and strong feelings of discomfort) and primitivity (rudimentary manner of functioning; giving strict priority to personal needs) (Le Blanc, 1985: 6).



In contrast to egocentrism, the allocentric individual is “not limited in outlook to personal activities and needs” in that they consider their surroundings through a disposition to think about others and behave in relation to other individuals (Le Blanc, 1997: 207). Through the use of interviews with a sample of 505 male youth, 288 of which were adjudicated young offenders and the remaining 217 were wards of the court, Le Blanc (1997) discovered that a weak or broken social bond, coupled with low allocentrism, is more powerful in explaining involvement in deviant behavior than social bonding variables alone. Le Blanc’s (1997) findings indicate that the level of the youth’s allocentrism may affect the development of social bonding variables. That is, youth with high allocentrism are more inclined to consider the impact of their actions on themselves and others, and are, therefore, more likely to have a strong social bond.

Although social control theorists are now considering psychological dimensions more explicitly (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Le Blanc, 1985; Le Blanc, 1997; Nagin & Paternoster, 1994; Polakowski, 1994; Silverman, Nakhaie, & LaGrange, 2000; Wright et al, 1999), relatively few empirical studies have explored social bonding in relation to individual differences. Of the studies that have considered the role of psychological factors on the development of the social bond, most have discovered that an individual or psychological deficit, such as egocentrism or low self-control, affects the development of a strong social bond (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Le Blanc, 1985; Le Blanc, 1997; Silverman, Nakhaie, & Lagrange, 2000; Wright et al., 1999). Consequently, one objective of future research on social bonding theory should be to explore psychological constructs, such as allocentrism or self-control, and their impact on the development of the social bond.

## **Delinquent Influences**

After testing social bonding theory, Hirschi (1969) revised his model to account for the fact that delinquent peers seem to have a direct impact on a youth's involvement in delinquent behavior. Following this shift in Hirschi's thinking, and its related implications, research on social bonding theory has begun to consider the impact of delinquent peers on offending behavior (Costello & Vowell, 1999; Friedman & Rosenbaum, 1988; Junger-Tas, 1992; Thompson, Mitchell, & Dobber, 1984; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994; Wiatrowski & Anderson, 1987). The results of this research suggest two pathways for how delinquent companions affect the social bond and youth involvement in delinquent or criminal activities. One pathway suggests that a weak or broken social bond leads to the acquisition of delinquent friends, while the other pathway indicates that delinquent friends lead to the weakening of the social bond (Le Blanc, 1997). Additional research further indicates that delinquent peers do not have an effect on the development or maintenance of the social bond.

Using interview data from a sample of 168 school dropouts aged 15 to 27, Samuelson, Hartnagel, and Krahn (1995) found that weak social bonds alone did not account for involvement in deviant behavior. Rather, other factors, such as involvement with deviant peers, was needed to provide those individuals with weak or broken social bonds with the additional inducements to engage in deviant behavior. Junger-Tas (1992) interviewed 2,000 youth to assess the social bond and found that youth who fail in conventional institutions and groups, such as family, peers, and school, turn to delinquent companions. In other words, delinquent peers do not disrupt social bonds. Rather, individuals with disrupted social bonds turn to delinquent peers in part because these

peers approve of and support the individual's deviant behavior. To further examine this issue, Thompson, Mitchell, and Dobber (1984) administered questionnaires to a sample of 724 youth, including students from four high schools and youth from three juvenile correctional institutions, to study the effects of attachment to parents, peers, and school. Their findings suggest that delinquent peers are related to involvement in delinquent behavior, regardless of the level of attachment to parents, prosocial peers, or school. That is, youth with high attachment and delinquent peers are as likely to engage in delinquent activities as a youth with low attachment and delinquent peers. Additional support for this conclusion is provided by Friedman and Rosenbaum's (1988) study of 1,708 high school students and 1,426 middle school students. Using self-administered questionnaires, this study suggest that adding delinquent companions to the social bonding model allows for a substantial increase in the explained variance of youth involvement in personal and property crime.

In contrast to the above results, Costello and Vowell (1999) use Hirschi's Richmond Youth Project data to assess social bonding and the relationship to delinquent friends. Their findings suggest that a weak social bond, rather than an association with delinquent friends, is more indicative of involvement in delinquency. According to this research, the social bond has a greater direct effect on delinquency than the variables assessing an association with delinquent companions. Similarly, Wiatrowski and Anderson (1987) discovered that delinquent peers are not as significant as the social bond in influencing delinquent behavior. Although the research results are mixed, the majority of research conducted on delinquent companions and social bonding theory indicates the

need to reconsider the social bonding model and its relationship to delinquent companions.

### **Religion**

Recently, researchers have begun to consider the relationship between religion, social bonding, and crime and delinquency. Many of these researchers argue that participation in religious activities and religiosity can be incorporated into the social control model (Brenda, 1997; Brenda & Corwyn, 1997; Brownfield & Sorenson, 1991; Cochran, Wood, & Arneklew, 1994). The assumption is that religiosity and involvement in religious activities is indicative of aspects of a social bond, namely attachment, commitment, and involvement (Akers, 1994).

Cochran, Wood, and Arneklew's (1994) research concludes that when controlling for social bonding, the relationship between religiosity and assault, theft, vandalism, illicit drug use, and truancy is erroneous. However, they also suggest that the relationship between a social bonding model that incorporates religiosity and the use of licit substances, such as alcohol and tobacco, is significant. That is, religiosity, as related to the social bond, does not effect one's involvement in criminal behavior, delinquent behavior, or illegal substance use, but low religiosity does contribute to involvement in the use of legal substances. Brownfield and Sorenson (1991) argue that attendance in church should be considered as a form of involvement in conventional activities and religiosity as a form of attachment. Using data from the Seattle Youth Survey, they assess the relationship between religion and drug use on a sample of 800 male youth who were either high school students, youth with a police record, or youth with a court record. They argue that a lack of church involvement and religious attachment are significantly related

to a youth's involvement in drug use. And, that this occurs in much the same way that attachment to parents and peers is related (Brownfield & Sorenson, 1991). In contrast to the above research findings, Brenda and Corwyn's (1997) study of 724 adolescents from four public high schools on the effects of religion on family and peer attachment, as related to status offences and criminal behavior, suggests that a lack of church attendance and religiosity are not correlated to involvement in status and/or criminal offences.

The research results of the construct of religion to the social bonding model indicates that the model need not be restricted to an application to parents, peers, and school. Instead, there is some support for the addition of religion as a key-determining variable in the social control model.

### **Conclusion**

Social bonding theory has been advanced as a theory that can explain involvement in various types of crime and delinquency for all types of people. Yet, a prevailing concern with this theory is whether it is truly a general theory of crime (Alarid, Burton, & Cullen, 2000). Empirical studies have expanded the social bonding model by testing it on a variety of demographic groups, assessing its explanatory power for different domains of deviance, and considering the role of delinquent companions, religion, and psychological factors. The research literature on social bonding theory reveals, however, that there are several important issues concerning Hirschi's version of social control theory that need empirical clarification.

The assessment of prior research on social bonding theory does not allow for any firm conclusions to be drawn about the generalizability of social bonding theory. Moreover, the empirical research that explains the offending behavior of serious and

violent incarcerated young offenders remains limited, especially when one attempts to evaluate gender and race issue. It is important, therefore, to continue research in these areas so that the social bonding model can be strengthened as an explanation for the involvement of youth in crime and delinquency.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology used to collect the data for this thesis. Specifically, this chapter discusses the research sample, the research approach, the instruments and methods used to conduct the study, the nominal and operational definitions used for the independent and dependant variables, and the techniques used for data preparation and analysis.

### **Location and Sampling**

The data was derived from a three year research project entitled: *A Survey of Young Offenders' Perceptions of Sentences: An Empirical Examination of a Perception Model and its Linkage to Subsequent Official Offending*.<sup>1</sup> Primarily, this research project focuses on how serious and violent young offenders react to their incarceration experience. This research also examines the youth's offending history, mental health problems, social relationships, educational history, family dynamics, and work history.

In order to evaluate the social bond, one hundred and fifty youth serving a custody disposition at four separate institutions, including two open and two secure custody units located in British Columbia, were approached to participate in this study. The sample represented a 93% consent rate. Refusals were primarily due to a conflict between the interview time and a previously scheduled visit or institutional program. Youth were interviewed at all stages of the incarceration process, ranging from those who

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (R-410-98-1246) to Raymond R. Corrado.

had just arrived at a youth detention center to those who were about to be released back into the community.

Although all types of young offenders were sampled, such as non-serious and non-violent offenders, a preference was given to the serious and/or violent young offenders, with an oversampling of Aboriginal and female young offenders. This research project used a non-probability purposive and convenience sample. This sampling method was selected because there were predetermined locations from which the sample could be drawn and, as mentioned above, because certain types of offenders were intentionally oversampled. The sample was convenient because there was a reliance on available subjects within the four institutions (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998; Palys, 1997). Specifically targeting serious and/or violent young offenders was needed in order to achieve a comparable base rate to the less serious and/or violent offenders.

### **Research Approach**

I have used a quantitative approach because this method emphasizes numerical precision, and allows for aggregated data and more sophisticated statistical analyses (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998; Palys, 1997). Due to the large sample size, and my preference for a quantitative approach, nomothetic analysis is employed. Nomothetic analysis involves aggregating data obtained from a sample and analyzing the relationship among a myriad of variables, thereby, allowing trends across subjects to be identified and examined (Palys, 1997). The nomothetic approach is, therefore, deemed appropriate because I intend to explain a group of situations, rather than describing a single situation (i.e. idiographic). Furthermore, this approach is preferable as this research requires statistical analyses of the relationships between each element of the social bond and



offence seriousness. The nomothetic approach is also preferred because it uncovers factors that explain a group of situations, such as those factors that may lead to youthful offending (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998; Palys, 1997).

As the research questions were informed by the specific hypothesis that the more serious and/or violent young offenders would have a higher frequency of weak or broken social bonds than other young offenders, the analysis of the data will be deductive (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998; Palys, 1997). I have selected the deductive approach because Hirschi's social bonding theory is used to guide my research and my observations. Accordingly, the inductive approach is inappropriate because the research does not begin with observation or attempt to develop a theory from the data.

In terms of data collection, I use a multi-method approach. The first method of data collection involves the examination of each participant's institutional file, while the second method involves a one-to-one interview with each subject. These two methods of data collection are preferred because they involve both a non-reactive (record examination) technique and a reactive (interview) technique (Babbie and Maxfield, 1998; Palys, 1997).

### **Instruments**

The examination of each subject's institutional file includes an extensive file review and coding of information. Generally, the institutional files contain: (a) Pre-disposition reports, outlining issues such as the youth's family, social, school, employment, and substance abuse history; (b) Psychological reports, discussing the youth's mental health background; (c) Provincial case files, detailing the youth's offending history; (d) Institutional reports, discussing the youth's behavior while

incarcerated; and (e) Extraneous documents. The examination of written records, as a method of data collection, is often criticized because they are frequently incomplete, subject to author selectivity, and are constructed for purposes other than data collection (Palys, 1997). Although these are valid critiques of file reviews, these problems are not detrimental to my research because the youth's files were used to provide supplementary information to the data obtained through direct interviews. Nonetheless, this file data was valuable because it provided a secondary source of information that added to the validity of the information obtained during the youth's interview. More specifically, this approach allowed for a more rigorous control of validity. For instance, I was able to evaluate the youth's self-reported current and previous charges and convictions against those on their official records to ensure honesty, validity, and consistency.

The interview portion of the data collection involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interview covers a range of criminal justice and non-criminal justice issues. In addition to basic demographic information, participants are questioned about their attitudes, values, and experiences on a wide range of issues, including deterrence, chronic offending lifestyles, fairness, procedural rights, special needs, school, family, housing, peers, employment, criminal history, mental illness, institutional behavior, identity formation, social bonding, and restorative justice initiatives. Interviews are often criticized for introducing a foreign element into the social setting, such as the researcher, and for being limited to those who are accessible and cooperative (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998). The interview method was chosen, however, because it ensures a high response rate, allows for the probing of answers, and helps to clarify confusing questions or terminology (Maxfield & Babbie, 1998).

The interview questions relating to demographics and the elements of the social bond include a variety of structured questions, such as single response items, categorical response items, and Likert scales. Structure is important for this research because it allows me to analyze a large amount of data, and to compare answers between respondents. Moreover, the closed-ended questions administered in this project have response categories that are both exhaustive and mutually exclusive. While one of the questions used to measure the social bond is open-ended, this question was recoded into standardized responses as part of the data cleaning.

### **Implementation**

In order to implement this research project, a strategic process was followed. This process included developing an inventory of all the young offenders residing at three of the four youth detention centres.<sup>2</sup> The inventory contained each youth's name, file number, end of disposition date, gender, ethnicity, and the offence for which they were currently serving a period of custody. The inventory of young offenders was updated regularly at three of the institutions to ensure that it included new subjects as they arrived in the institutions. From this inventory of young offenders, specific youth were interviewed. The factors affecting whether a youth was approached to participate included the nature of their offence and whether youth was female or Aboriginal. All female and Aboriginal youth were approached to participate in this study, regardless of the offence they committed. Once the subject was identified, his or her file was reviewed

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<sup>2</sup> The fourth institution, Boulder Bay, was visited one or two times a year at which time all the youth within the institution who met the project criteria were interviewed.

and coded. Once the file review was complete, a trained researcher would approach the youth and read him or her an information sheet describing the nature of the research project.<sup>3</sup> Following this, the youth was read an informed consent sheet that outlined the principles of voluntary participation and confidentiality. If the youth agreed to participate in the study, he or she would sign the informed consent sheet and the interview would begin. Each interview was approximately one and a half hours in length and was followed by a short debriefing.

### Measures

The variables under consideration in this study include the independent variables of attachment to parents, attachment to peers, attachment to school, commitment to conventional lines of action, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in society's normative system, the dependent variable of offence seriousness, and the control variables of gender and ethnicity. Although the nominal definitions of the independent variables were similar to Hirschi's (1969), the items used to operationalize the constructs and sub-constructs were not entirely comparable to those used in *Causes of Delinquency*. The main reason for the variation in indicators is that Hirschi's measures were designed for a delinquent sample and not a sample of serious and/or violent young offenders. In this way, my research is not an exact replication of Hirschi's study.

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<sup>3</sup> The group of interviewers consisted of 20 undergraduate and graduate students who were extensively trained on the research instruments and protocols. On all indicators that required interviewers to score based on their impressions, inter-rater reliability tests were routinely conducted.

### **Attachment to parents**

As mention in Chapter One, attachment involves the youth's ability to care about and be sensitive to others' opinions and expectations of them. Attachment to parents is assessed through the strength of the psychological hold that parents have on the youth, the intimacy of communication between parents and child, and the youth's affectional identification with his or her parents. Specifically, attachment to parents is measured by the following questions: "Does your mother know your whereabouts when you are away from home?", "Does your father know your whereabouts when you are away from home?", "Does your mother know who you are with when you are away from home?", "Does your father know who you are with when you are away from home?", "Do you talk to your mother about your thoughts and feelings?", "Do you talk to your father about your thoughts and feelings?", "Would you like to be the type of person your mother is?", and "Would you like to be the type of person your father is?"

### **Attachment to Peers**

In this thesis, I only measure the negative dimension of attachment to peers by assessing the youth's exposure to criminal or delinquent influences. This aspect of attachment is assessed by the following questions: "What percentage of your friends are involved in selling drugs?", "What percentage of your friends are involved in theft?", "What percentage of your friends are involved in prostitution?", and "How many of your friends would be considered delinquents or criminals by the police?"

### **Attachment to School**

I assess the youth's attachment to school by their attitudes towards school and their concern for teachers' opinions. This item is measured with two questions: "How do you like school?" and "How often do you have troubles with teachers?"

### **Commitment**

Commitment refers to the time an individual invests in prosocial activities. Commitment is assessed by the youth's achievement orientation and involvement in adult status activities. To measure commitment, youth are asked: "How important is it for you to get good grades?", "How much schooling would you like to get eventually", "Do you ever skip out of class?", "Do you use drugs?", "At what age did you start using drugs?", "Do you use alcohol?", "At what age did you first start drinking?", "Have you ever had a girlfriend/boyfriend?", and "At what age did you start having sex?"

### **Involvement**

Involvement refers to a preoccupation with activities that stress the conventional interests of society (Hirschi, 1969). Involvement is assessed by the youth's expenditure of time in school related activities and whether the youth was employed before being incarcerated. This element of the social bond is measured by three questions: "Were you enrolled in school at the time of the offence", "How often do you do homework/projects outside of school?", and "Were you employed at the time of the offence?"

### **Belief**

To assess one's acceptance of a common value system within society, questions relating to techniques of neutralization and fatalism were asked. Specifically, two

indicators measure this element: “Do you think you deserve to be in jail for what you have done?” and “How much do you think you are responsible for where you are today?”

### **Offence Type**

As part of the larger research project, all current and prior offences for which the youth was found guilty under the Young Offenders Act is recorded. However, for the purposes of this thesis, only the most serious current offence was examined. Using the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system, current offences are collapsed into the following categories (see Appendix A): murder; sex offences; assault; robbery/arson; property; drug offences; escape/breaches; and miscellaneous. Based on Snyder’s offence classification (1998), the categories from the UCR system are further collapsed into the categories of violent, serious non-violent, and delinquent. Violent offences include the UCR categories of assault, robbery/arson, sex offences, and homicide. Serious non-violent offences include property and drug offences, and delinquent offences include breaches, escapes, and other miscellaneous crimes. It is the offence categories of violent = 2, serious non-violent = 1, and delinquent = 0 that measure the dependent variable of offence seriousness in this thesis.

### **Control Variables**

The control variables of ethnicity and gender were also coded. Gender was dummy coded into 0 for males and 1 for females. Ethnicity was initially coded into the following six categories: Caucasian; Black; Aboriginal; Asiatic; Indian; and other. However, because I am specifically interested in the impact of the social bond on Aboriginal young offenders, the ethnicity variable was recoded into the following dummy variables: 1 = Aboriginal and 0 = Non-Aboriginal.

## **Data Preparation and Analysis**

As the scales used to code the social bonding variables were not in a consistent format, numerous variables have been recoded to ensure consistency within each construct and sub-construct of the social bond. Also, some of the bonding variables were missing data. A missing data procedure using the regression sub-command has been used to replace missing values of the social bonding variables up to 10%.

With respect to data analyses, the characteristics of the sample, the independent variables, and the dependent variable are examined with distributional and tabulation procedures. Cronbach's alpha measure is used to assess whether the indicators for the constructs and sub-constructs of the social bond reliably go together. In other words, the internal consistency of each construct and sub-construct is assessed prior to any data analysis. The standardized item alpha of the Cronbach's alpha simplifies the average inter-item correlation for the variables comprising the constructs and sub-constructs. Selected constructs and sub-constructs with unacceptably low reliability coefficients are not included in further analysis.

Multiple indicators for each element of the social bond do not allow for a simple analysis of the theory. To deal with this problem, scales have been created for each element of the social bond. The items assumed to represent the various elements of the social bond are factor analyzed using principle components analysis, with varimax rotation when necessary, to examine the underlying structure. Scores are computed for the factors, using the multiple regression method, and used to assess the relationships between the independent and dependent variables through Pearson's correlations. To



examine any differences between gender and race and the social bond, first order partial correlations have been run controlling for gender and ethnicity.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

This chapter outlines the characteristics of the sample of young offenders in a variety of domains, such as general demographics, living arrangements, school profile, substance abuse history, parental relationships, family profiles, and offending history. The elements of the social bond are then assessed in terms of the indicators' distribution and reliability. Where the constructs have a reasonable distribution and are reliable, a factor analysis is performed to summarize the indicators into scales. The summarized component for each element of the social bond is used to perform a bivariate correlation with the dependent variable of offence seriousness. To assess the effects of gender and ethnicity on the reliable elements of the social bond, first order partial correlations are performed, controlling for gender and ethnicity.

### **Sample Demographics**

A sample of 150 incarcerated young offenders completed the social bonding portion of the interview schedule. Of these youth, 106 are male (70.7%) and 44 are female (29.3%). Aboriginal youth make up 22% of the sample, Caucasians comprise 63.3% of the sample, while East Indian, Asian, and Black youth comprise the remaining 14.7%. The age of the participants at the time of their most current disposition range from 12 to 19 years old, with a mean age of 16. A comparison of the average age at disposition for males and females, and for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, indicates that these sub-groups of youth are similar in age to the sample as a whole.

### **Living Arrangement**

In terms of where the youth was living at the time that they committed the offence for which they were incarcerated, 16.3% resided with both of their natural parents, 26.5% lived with their natural mother only, and 7.5% lived with their natural father only. Thus, a total of 50.3% of the sample lived with a least one of their biological parents. However, 34% of the youth lived in a single parent home, and, in most cases, these households were led by single mothers. In addition, 21.7% of the youth were living in a foster or group home at the time of their offence. The remaining youth resided alone (3.4%), with a relative or an adoptive parent (6.8%), with a partner or friend (13%), or on the street (3.4%).

In addition to the breakdown of the nuclear family in this sample, these youth also experience a large degree of domestic instability, as defined by either being kicked out of their homes or by choosing to leave their primary residence. For example, 76.9% of the youth in the sample left their homes on their own volition, with 11 being the mean number of times that these youth have left their home. Moreover, just over half (51.7%) of the youth have been kicked out, with 5 being the mean number of times they have been kicked out of their home. The mobility and instability of these youth also begins at a very young age as indicated by the finding that the average age that these youth first leave their home by choice is 12 years old, while the mean age of their first eviction is 13.

### **School Profile**

The number of youth enrolled in school at the time that they committed the offence for which they were incarcerated was 49.3%. Aboriginal and female respondents had a higher school enrollment with 60.6% of the Aboriginal youth and 59.1% of all

females enrolled in school. A general lack of stability in the school environment is also prevalent for this sample of young offenders. On average, these youth have changed schools 6 times. This result does not refer to changes in school due to grade changes or graduation. Rather, this refers to changes required by domestic mobility or school expulsion for various types of behavior, such as fighting, violence, truancy, defiant behavior directed at school officials, peers problems, and drug use. Only 6.3% of the sample indicates that they have never changed schools due to behavioral or academic problems.

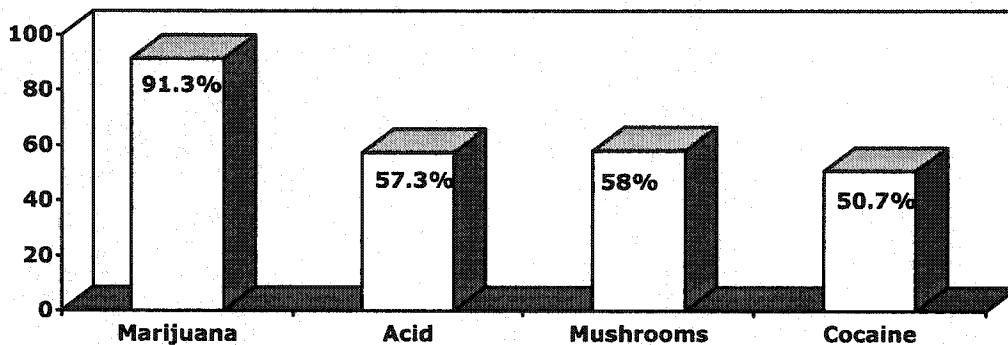
Although just over half (51.3%) of the participants reported a positive attitude towards school, serious conflicts or problems with teachers and school officials remain high. On average, the age that a youth first got into trouble at school is 10 years old. However, some youth report getting into trouble as early as 4 years old, or as late as 17 years old. 50% of the sample reports never doing homework or projects outside of school and 90% admit to frequently skipping class. While these findings are consistent with the literature on serious and violent young offenders other findings are less indicative. For instance, 62% of the sample report that it is either important or very important for them to get good grades in school, while 49.3% of the sample report that they would like to get a university or college education.

### **Substance Use**

As expected, self-report substance use and abuse is also very high for this sample. The majority of youth report the use of illicit drugs (66.7%) and alcohol (86.7%). Of those youth who report using drugs, a large percentage use marijuana (see Figure 5). Of the 91.3% of youth who report using marijuana, 81.3% report that they use this drug a

few times a week or more. Just over 50% of the sample report using acid, mushrooms, and/or cocaine. 40.2% of those who use mushrooms and 50.6% of those who use acid report rarely using the drug, but the majority of cocaine users (66.2%) indicate that they use the drug at least once a month.

Figure 5: Percentage of Youth using Illegal Substances



There are also high rates of other drug use. Specifically, youth report using crack cocaine (38.7%), ecstasy (38%) and heroin (24.7%) quite frequently. With respect to alcohol use, 69% report drinking at least once a week or more. In this context, drinking refers to using alcohol with the intention of getting drunk.

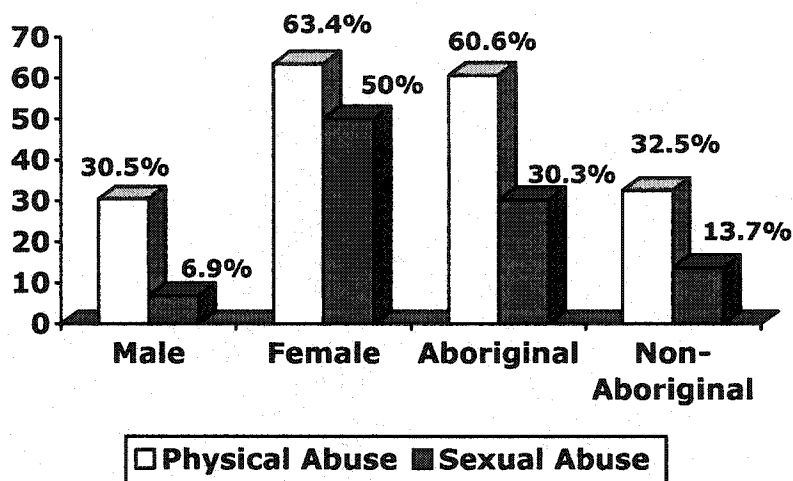
### Abuse Profile

46.2% of youth report being a victim of either physical or sexual abuse. More specifically, 39.7% of the participants have suffered from physical abuse and 18.6% experienced some form of sexual abuse. An example of the abuse profiles by gender reveals that females are more likely than males to report being the victim of either

physical or sexual abuse (see Figure 6).<sup>1</sup> Similar to the relationship between the genders, when compared to Non-Aboriginal youth, a much higher number of Aboriginal youth report being a victim of physical and/or sexual abuse.

Figure 6: Percent of Abuse Reported by Males/Females and Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal

Youth



### Parental Relationships

With respect to the youth's relationships with their parents, the data indicates that youth are more likely to communicate with and respect their mothers, when compared to their fathers. Still, the amount of communication and respect that these youth have for their mothers remains low. For instance, youth report that 24.7% of their mothers and 43.3% of their fathers do not know the youth's whereabouts when they are out of the

<sup>1</sup> These statistics may be the result of reporting bias as research has demonstrated that males are less likely than females to report any type of abuse, especially sexual abuse.

home. Similarly, 24.7% of mothers and 42.7% of fathers do not know who their child is associating with when youth are out of the home. In terms of sharing their thoughts and feelings with their parents, 34% of the sample report never sharing with their mother and 55.3% report never sharing with their father. It also appears that numerous youth in the sample do not idealize their parents, as 31.3% report that they do not wish to be like their mother and 32% report that they do not want to be like their father.

### **Family Profiles**

While the majority of the youth report that their parents are employed, the level of parental unemployment remains above British Columbia's average rate. Specifically, 37% of the mothers and 25% of the fathers are unemployed. In addition to unemployment, there are high levels of self-reported family problems or dysfunction. In terms of substance abuse issues, 73.5% of the sample indicates that at least one member of their immediate or extended family suffers from alcoholism. Drug use among family members is reported for 58.3% of the sample. With respect to the physical and sexual abuse history of family members, 49.3% of the participants report that at least one family member has been physically abused, while 19.4% report that at least one family member has been sexually assaulted. Moreover, 25.2% of the youth report that a family member suffers from a serious mental illness, 66.4% report that at least one family member has a criminal record, and 35.6% report that one or more family members has been in foster care.

### **Offending Profile**

A review of institutional files reveals that 23% of the youth in the sample are first-time offenders. However, the sample's mean number of previous convictions is 3.5.

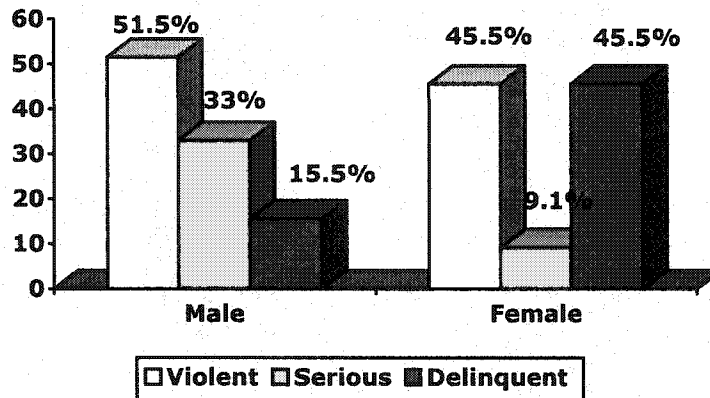
Using the Uniform Crime Reporting system to create an index for the most serious offence that resulted in the youth being incarcerated demonstrates the serious and violent nature of their offending behavior. Specifically, 6.8% of the youth were incarcerated for first degree murder, second degree murder, manslaughter, or attempted murder, 1.4% for sex offences, 25.2% for assaults, 16.3% for robbery, 23.8% for property offences, 2% for drug related offences, 22.4% for a breach or an escape, and 2% for miscellaneous offences, such as trespassing or causing a disturbance. In terms of offence types based on Snyder's (1998) recode, 49.7% of the youth have been incarcerated for violent offences, 25.9% for serious non-violent offences, and 24.5% have committed some form of delinquency. While the offending profile of the Aboriginal youth is similar to the sample as a whole, there are some interesting differences between the genders for the entire sample. For example, females have a lower involvement in serious non-violent acts, but a higher involvement in delinquent acts, while their participation in violent offences is comparable to the males in the sample (see Figure 6).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The differences in offence type exhibited by females may be a result of the intentional over-sampling of this sub-group.



Figure 7: Offence Breakdown by Gender



In terms of the offence for which they are currently incarcerated for, 66.2% of the youth plead guilty, 9.8% were found guilty, and 23.3% plead guilty to a lesser charge. With respect to their sentences, 37.3% received a period of probation with the mean length of time being 16½ months, 41.3% received an open custody disposition with an average length of 84 days, 48% received a closed custody disposition with an average length of 278 days, and 8.7% received other forms of dispositions, such as community work service orders or restitution.

With respect to ethnicity, sentences for probation are consistent across the two sub-groups. However, Aboriginal youth are less likely than Non-Aboriginal youth to receive an open custody disposition. Still, when they do receive an open custody disposition, they are sentenced for a longer period of incarceration than the non-Aboriginal youth. While 43.6% of non-Aboriginal youth were sentenced to open custody, for an average length of 67 days, 33.3% of Aboriginals received this disposition, but for a mean of 165 days. In terms of closed custody, Aboriginal youth are more likely to receive this sentence, however, the length of their sentences are comparable to non-Aboriginal

youth. 46.2% of non-Aboriginal youth were sentenced to closed custody with a mean sentence length of 144 days, while 54.5% of Aboriginal youth received this disposition with a mean sentence length of 153 days.

In terms of gender, females are more likely than males to receive a disposition of open custody, and are less likely to receive a closed custody disposition or a period of probation. In terms of open custody dispositions, 34% of males in the sample were given this sentence with an average sentence length of 93 days, while 59.1% of the female youth received an open custody sentence with an average sentence length of 71 days. While 55.7% of the male youth were sentenced to closed custody for an average of 105 days, 29.5% of the females received this disposition with a mean sentence length of 45 days. Similarly, 45.3% of the male youth were sentenced to an average of 17 months probation, while 18.2% of the females received an average of 15 months probation.

### **Attachment to Parents**

Table 1 outlines the distribution, mean score, and standard deviation of the eight indicators that are used to measure attachment to parents. The standardized item alpha score (.73) for the reliability coefficient suggest that the indicators used to assess attachment to parents have internal consistency. Consistency of the indicators is also present for the sub-groups of males (.70) and females (.80), and Aboriginal youth (.68) and non-Aboriginal youth (.75).

**Table 1: Attachment to Parents – Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Response	% of 1 Response	% of 2 Response	% of 3 Response	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
*Does your mother know your whereabouts when you are away from home?	24.7%	38.0%	20.7%	16.7%	1.29	1.02
*Does your father know your whereabouts when you are away from home?	43.3%	31.3%	14.7%	10.7%	.93	1.00
*Does your mother know who you are with when you are away from home?	24.7%	40.0%	22.7%	12.7%	1.23	.97
*Does your father know who you are with when you are away from home?	42.7%	29.3%	20.0%	8.0%	.93	.97
*Do you talk to your mother about your thoughts and feelings?	34.0%	41.1%	11.3%	13.3%	1.04	1.00
*Do you talk to your father about your thoughts and feelings?	55.3%	30.0%	6.0%	8.7%	.68	.93
**Would you like to be the type of person your mother is?	31.3%	44.7%	20.7%	3.3%	.96	.81
**Would you like to be the type of person your father is?	32.0%	44.0%	19.3%	4.7%	.97	.84

\* 4 point scale: 0 = Never; 1 = Sometimes; 2 = Usually; 3 = Always

\*\* 4 point scale: 0 = Not at all; 1 = In a few ways; 2 = In most ways; 3 = In every way

A principle components analysis solution for attachment to parents (see Table 2) reveals that three components, which might be characterized as attachment to father, mother knowing the youth's whereabouts and acquaintances, and sharing with and wanting to be like their mother, account for 68% of the variability of the original eight indicators after a varimax rotation.

**Table 2: Principle Components Analysis for Attachment to Parents**

Components	Factor Loading	% of Item Variance
Father Attachment: Does your father know your whereabouts when you are away from home? Does your father know who you are with when you are away from home? Do you talk to your father about your thoughts and feelings? Would you like to be the type of person your father is?	.708 .619 .809 .795	27.5%
Mother knowing whereabouts and acquaintances: Does your mother know your whereabouts when you are away from home? Does your mother know who you are with when you are away from home?	.728 .825	22.8%
Sharing and wanting to be like mother: Do you talk to your mother about your thoughts and feelings? Would you like to be the type of person your mother is?	.772 .767	19.0%

As I want to focus primarily on parental attachment in terms of parental roles (mother and father), a second analysis was run, constraining the components to two. The second analysis (see Table 3) reveals that two components, which can be defined as attachment to father and attachment to mother, account for 56% of the variance of the eight indicators after a varimax rotation. Component scores were computed for the attachment to mother variables and the attachment to father variables using the multiple regression method and were saved for each case for use in further analyses.

**Table 3: Second Principle Components Analysis for Attachment to Parents**

Components	Factor Loading	% of Item Variance
Father Attachment:		
Does your father know your whereabouts when you are away from home?	.823	30.1%
Does your father know who you are with when you are away from home?	.766	
Do you talk to your father about your thoughts and feelings?	.747	
Would you like to be the type of person your father is?	.718	
Mother Attachment:		
Does your mother know your whereabouts when you are away from home?	.793	25.9%
Does your mother know who you are with when you are away from home?	.710	
Do you talk to your mother about your thoughts and feelings?	.671	
Would you like to be the type of person your mother is?	.642	

Table 4 presents the simple correlation between the component scores representing attachment to mother and attachment to father, with the dependent variable of offence seriousness. While there is no relationship between attachment to mother and offence seriousness, the correlation reveals that attachment to father is positively related to offence seriousness. In other words, the more that youth are attached to their fathers, the more likely they are incarcerated for a more serious offence.

**Table 4: Zero Order Simple Correlation of Attachment to Mother and Attachment to Father Variables to Offence Seriousness**

	Offence Seriousness
Attachment to Father	.224**
Attachment to Mother	.063

N = 150

\* $p < .05$ , one tailed

\*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

When controlling for ethnicity, the correlation between the independent variables of attachment to mother and attachment to father, with the dependent variable of offence seriousness, do not change substantially (see Table 5). Although the first order partial correlation for the attachment to father variable and seriousness of offence remains significant, it is weaker than the simple correlation.

**Table 5: Partial Correlations of Attachment to Mother and Attachment to Father Variables to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Ethnicity**

	Offence Seriousness
Attachment to Father	.221**
Attachment to Mother	.066

N = 150  
 \* $p < .05$ , one tailed  
 \*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

Similar to ethnicity, when controlling for gender, the partial correlation between the independent variables of attachment to mother and attachment to father, with the dependent variable of offence seriousness, does not change notably (see Table 6). While the partial correlation for the attachment to father variable and offence seriousness is lower than the simple correlation, it remains significant.

**Table 6: Partial Correlations of Attachment to Mother and Attachment to Father Variables to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Gender.**

	Offence Seriousness
Attachment to Father	.218**
Attachment to Mother	.073

N = 150  
 \* $p < .05$ , one tailed  
 \*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

### **Attachment to Peers**

Table 7 presents the distribution, means score, and standard deviation of the four indicators used to measure attachment to delinquent peers. The indicator assessing the number of friends involved in prostitution had to be dropped from further analysis because its distribution was skewed. The standardized item alpha score (.73) from the reliability coefficient suggest that the three indicators used to assess attachment to delinquent peers have internal consistency. The variables also have internal consistency for the sub-groups of males (.73) and females (.75), and Aboriginals (.83) and non-Aboriginals (.70).

**Table 7: Attachment to Peers – Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Response	% of 1 Response	% of 2 Response	% of 3 Response	% of 4 Response	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
*What percentage of your friends are involved in selling drugs?	23.3%	32.7%	17.3%	26.7%	-	50.88	29.92
*What percentage of your friends are involved in theft?	36.7%	24.7%	13.3%	25.3%	-	44.19	33.56
*What percentage of your friends are involved in prostitution?	88.7%	6.7%	3.3%	1.3%	-	8.79	18.90
**How many of your friends would be considered delinquent or criminal by the police?	4.4%	10.7%	29.3%	33.3%	22.0%	2.57	1.09

\* 4 point scale: 0 = 0 – 25%; 1 = 26 – 50%; 2 = 51 – 75%; 3 = 76 – 100%

\*\* 5 point scale: 0 = None; 1 = Hardly Any; 2 = Some; 3 = Most; 4 = All



A principle components analysis solution for the attachment to peers data reveals that one factor accounts for 65% of the variability of the original three indicators (see Table 8). Using the multiple regression method, a component score was computed and saved for each case for use in the simple and partial correlations.

**Table 8: Principle Components Analysis for Attachment to Peers**

Components	Factor Loading	% of Item Variance
Delinquent Peer Attachment: What percentage of your friends are involved in selling drugs? What percentage of your friends are involved in theft? How many of your friends would be considered delinquent or criminal by the police?	.795 .799 .830	65.2%

In terms of assessing the relationship between attachment to delinquent peers and offence seriousness, the results from a simple correlation suggest that there is no relationship ( $r = -.086$ ,  $n = 150$ ,  $p = .147$ ). When controlling for gender, the correlation between the independent variable of attachment to delinquent peers and the dependent variable of offence seriousness does not change considerably (see Table 9).

**Table 9: Partial Correlations of Attachment to Delinquent Peers Variable to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Gender**

	Offence Seriousness
Attachment to Delinquent Peers	-.065

N = 150  
\* $p < .05$ , one tailed  
\*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

The partial correlation between the independent variable of attachment to delinquent peers and the dependent variable of offence seriousness, when controlling for ethnicity, does not change substantially from the results of the simple correlation (see Table 10).

**Table 10: Partial Correlations of Attachment to Delinquent Peer Variable to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Ethnicity**

	Offence Seriousness
Attachment to Delinquent Peers	-.082

N = 150

\* $p < .05$ , one tailed

\*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

### Attachment to School

The distribution, mean score, and standard deviation of the two indicators used to measure attachment to school is presented in Table 11. Alpha scores for the attachment to school variables are low for the sample as a whole and for the gender sub-groups. The standardized item alpha score (.46) from the reliability coefficient suggest that these two indicators have low internal consistency and have little value for the group as a whole. In terms of gender, the results of the reliability coefficients indicates that these two sub-groups do represent acceptable standardized item alpha scores for the attachment to school variables. Specifically, the score for males is .51 and .27 for females.

**Table 11: Attachment to School -- Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Response	% of 1 Response	% of 2 Response	% of 3 Responses	% of 4 Responses	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
*How do you like school?	32.7%	16.0%	51.3%	-	-	1.19	.90
**How often do you have trouble with teachers?	10.7%	22.7%	26.0%	21.3%	19.3%	2.16	1.27

\* 3 point scale: 0 = Dislike; 1 = Mixed; 2 = Like

\*\* 5 point scale: 0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often; 4 = Always

With respect to ethnicity, the results suggest that the variables do have adequate internal consistency for the Aboriginal subjects (.78), but not for the non-Aboriginal youth (.32). As such, the following analysis was performed on the Aboriginal youth only. A principle components analysis solution for attachment to school for the Aboriginal participants reveals that the two indicators can be combined into one factor that accounts for 82% of the variability (see Table 12). A component score was computed for the attachment to school data for the Aboriginal youth using the multiple regression method and was saved for each case for use in further analyses.

**Table 12: Principle Components Analysis for Aboriginal Youth and Attachment to School**

Components	Factor Loading	% of Item Variance
Attachment to school: How do you like school? How often do you have trouble with teachers?	.909 .909	82.6%

In terms of a bivariate correlation for the Aboriginal youth, there is no apparent relationship between a strong attachment to school and currently being incarcerated for a more serious offence ( $r = -.010, n = 33, p = .477$ ).

### **Commitment**

Table 13 presents the distribution, mean score, and standard deviation for the nine indicators used to measure commitment to conventional lines of action. As demonstrated in Table 13, the indicators measuring skipping school, using drugs, using alcohol, and having a girlfriend or boyfriend are skewed. As such, they have been dropped from further analysis. The standardized item alpha score (.50) from the reliability coefficient

suggest that the five remaining indicators used to assess commitment to conventional lines of action lack internal consistency. The indicators assessing the importance of grades and how much school the youth would like to receive in the future were not correlated with the other items and have been dropped from the analysis as they were affecting the reliability coefficients. The second reliability analysis using the three remaining variables reveals an acceptable standardized item coefficient (.66). The variables also have internal consistency for the sub-groups of male (.66) and female (.69), and Aboriginal (.60) and non-Aboriginal (.67) youth.

**Table 13: Commitment – Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Response	% of 1 Response	% of 2 Response	% of 3 Response	% of 4 Response	% of 5 Response	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
**How important is it for you to get good grades?	8.7%	17.3%	12.0%	33.3%	28.7%	-	2.56	1.30
*Do you ever skip out of class?	90.0%	10.0%	-	-	-	-	.90	.30
*Do you use drugs?	66.7%	33.3%	-	-	-	-	.67	.47
***At what age did you start using drugs?	24.0%	13.3%	23.3%	14.7%	6.0%	2.1%	11.69	2.38
*Do you use alcohol?	86.7%	13.3%	-	-	-	-	.87	.34
***At what age did you first start drinking?	28.7%	3.3%	22.0%	20.0%	16.7%	9.3%	6.73	1.82
*Have you ever had a girlfriend/boyfriend?	98.0%	2.0%	-	-	-	-	.98	.14
***At what age did you start having sex?	6.8%	6.8%	17.7%	27.9%	23.1%	15.7%	13.03	1.85
****How much schooling would you like to get eventually?	0.0%	6.7%	37.3%	6.7%	49.3%	-	2.99	1.07

\* 2 point scale: 0 = Yes; 1 = No

\*\* 5 point scale: 0 = Totally Unimportant; 1 = Not Very Important; 2 = Neutral; 3 = Important 4 = Very Important

\*\*\* 6 point scale: 0 = Before Age 11; 1 = Age 11; 2 = Age 12; 3 = Age 13; 4 = Age 15; 5 = Age 15 or Older

\*\*\*\* 5 point scale: 0 = No more than I've already got; 1 = More of High School; 2 = High School Graduation; 3 = On the job apprenticeship or vocational school; 4 = College or University

A principle components analysis solution for the remaining commitment data reveals that one factor accounts for 60% of the variability of the original three indicators (see Table 14). Using the multiple regression method, a component score was computed and saved for each case for use in further analysis.

**Table 14: Principle Components Analysis for Commitment to Conventional Lines of Action**

Components	Factor Loading	% of Item Variance
Attachment to school:		
At what age did you start using drugs?	.903	60.5%
At what age did you first start drinking?	.739	
At what age did you start having sex?	.674	

A simple correlation suggests that there is a positive and significant relationship between commitment and offence seriousness ( $r = .150, n = 151, p < .05$ ). In other words, the longer the youth waits to become involved in alcohol use, drugs use, and sexual relationships, the more likely they are to be incarcerated for a more serious offence.

When controlling for gender, the correlation between the independent variable of commitment to conventional lines of action and the dependent variable of offence type does not change significantly (see Table 15). While the partial correlation for the commitment variable and offence seriousness remains significant ( $p < .05$ ), the relationship is somewhat stronger than it is in the simple correlation.

**Table 15: Partial Correlations of Commitment Variable to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Gender**

	Offence Seriousness
Commitment	.166*

N = 150

\* $p < .05$ , one tailed

\*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

Similar to gender, when controlling for ethnicity, the correlation between the independent variable of attachment to delinquent peers and the dependent variable of offence seriousness does not change significantly (see Table 16). While the partial correlation for the commitment variable and offence type remains significant ( $p < .05$ ), the relationship is slightly stronger than the simple correlation.

**Table 16: Partial Correlations of Commitment Variable to Offence Seriousness Controlling for Ethnicity**

	Offence Seriousness
Commitment	.153*

N = 150

\* $p < .05$ , one tailed

\*\* $p < .01$ , one tailed

### **Involvement**

The distribution, mean score, and standard deviation for the three indicators used to measure involvement in conventional activities are presented in Table 17. The standardized item alpha score (.18) from the reliability coefficient suggest that these three indicators lack internal consistency. In terms of gender, the results of the reliability coefficient indicate that these two sub-groups do not represent acceptable standardized



item alpha scores. The score for males is .18 and .14 for females. With respect to ethnicity, the results indicate that the variables do not have internal consistency. The score for the Aboriginal subjects is .26 and .15 for the non-Aboriginal youth. As a result, this construct will not be assessed any further.

**Table 17: Involvement – Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Responses	% of 1 Responses	% of 2 Responses	% of 3 Responses	% of 4 Response	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
*How often do you do homework/projects outside of school?	50.0%	19.3%	10.7%	12.0%	8.0%	1.09	1.35
**Were you employed at the time of the offence?	30.0%	70.0%	-	-	-	.70	.46
**Were you enrolled in school at the time of the offence?	49.3%	50.7%	-	-	-	.49	.50

\* 5 point scale: 0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Often; 4 = Always

\*\* 2 point scale: 0 = Yes; 1 = No

## **Belief**

Table 18 presents the distribution, mean score, and standard deviation for the two indicators used to measure belief in society's normative system. The standardized item alpha score (.47) from the reliability coefficient suggest that the indicators used to assess belief do not have internal consistency. The results of the reliability coefficients indicate that the two sub-groups of male and female, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal do not represent acceptable standardized item alpha scores. The score is .53 for males and .25 for females, and .40 for Aboriginal youth and .50 for non-Aboriginal youth. Due to these low standardized item alpha scores, this construct will not be assessed any further.

**Table 18: Belief -- Indicator Distributions**

Indicator	% of 0 Responses	% of 1 Responses	% of 2 Responses	% of 3 Responses	% of 4 Responses	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
*Do you think you deserve to be in jail for what you have done?	18.7%	11.3%	21.3%	24.0%	24.7%	2.25	1.43
*How much do you think you are responsible for where you are today?	4.0%	6.0%	16.0%	30.0%	44.0%	3.04	1.10

\* 5 point scale: 0 = Not at all; 1 = Hardly at all; 2 = Some; 3= Mostly; 4 = Totally

## **Conclusion**

The primary objective of this thesis is to evaluate whether Hirschi's sociological predictors of general delinquency can also predict offence seriousness. This study of 150 incarcerated young offenders illustrates that the relationship between the seriousness of the youths' current offence and social bonding is complex. My original hypothesis was that the elements of strong attachment to parents, attachment to peers, attachment to school, commitment to conventional lines of action, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in society's normative system would be inversely related to youth involvement in more serious offending. Although one would expect social bonding theory to explain serious offending behavior better than other types of crime, for the most part, this hypothesis must be rejected. In the next chapter, I discuss these research findings and their implications for prevention and intervention programs for serious and violent young offenders.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

Prior to a discussion of the research findings, there are several limitations to this research that must be acknowledged. Once these limitations have been discussed, the implications for social bonding as an explanatory theory of official involvement in the most serious forms of youthful offending is considered. The impact of social bonding theory and its policy implications for young offenders are also discussed. Moreover, in this chapter, I identify themes for the further theoretical development of social bonding theory and new directions for additional research.

### **Project Limitations**

It is essential to exercise some degree of caution when interpreting the findings of this research project. Although the elements of the social bond are evaluated in a way that is comparable to Hirschi's original theory, this research is not an inclusive or exact utilization of the measures of social bonding theory. Hirschi, for instance, did not use several of the indicators used in this study to evaluate the elements of the social bond, and many of the indicators used in Hirschi's original assessment were not included in this research. Problems with the indicators that I use to measure some elements of the social bond are evident in light of the results of the reliability coefficients. Standardized alpha scores for the attachment to school, commitment to conventional lines of action, involvement in conventional behavior, and belief in society's normative system suggest that the indicators used to assess these constructs lack in internal consistency. This problem is likely a result of measurement error on my part, as opposed to a flaw in Hirschi's theory.

Another potential problem with this study lies in the dependent variable and its measurement. Although the dependent variable was drawn from the youth's institutional file, problems may exist in terms of its validity. As noted previously, for their current offence, 24% of the youth in the sample plead guilty to and were sentenced to a lesser charge. The possibility exists that youth who committed a violent or more serious offence could have been processed for a less serious or delinquent offence as a result of a plea bargain or other judicial procedure. This may have impaired the research findings because a violent youth may have been coded as a non-violent offender. If this is the case, the distinction between offenders based on the seriousness of their current offence may be an artificial, or inaccurate, one.

Another possible problem with the dependent variable is in the categorizations of defining any youth in this sample as less serious offenders. This is because research has demonstrated that many youth who serve a period of incarceration may have a history of unofficial involvement in more serious types of offending behavior (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Even though 23% of the youth in the sample are first-time offenders, being a first-time official offender does not imply that the youth has never been involved in unofficial serious or violent behavior. Still, it should be kept in mind that it is unlikely that a youth could be involved in less serious violent offending over a significant period of time and not come into contact with the criminal justice system. Moreover, a benefit of using the youth's most serious current offence as the dependent variable is that it controls for the fact that the social bond can change over time. As discussed in Chapter One, an individual who has been violent and had weak social bonds in the past may have developed strong social bonds and ceased their involvement in violent behavior. Using

the most current official offence allows for a measurement of a youth's current social bond now and its effect on the youth's current behavior. Finally, in terms of current involvement in more serious or violent unofficial offending behavior, it is recognized that rather than a narrow focus on current official offences, this study should have also included self-report behavior in its measurement of involvement in more serious offences.

### **Attachment to Parents**

Unlike Hirschi's research, for this sample of young offenders, the attachment to parent data does not represent one distinct construct of the social bond. Rather, through the use of principle component analysis, the data divided into several factors. When Hirschi first presented his theory, he suggested that a youth's attachment to their mother and their father was equally important for understanding involvement in delinquent behavior. Hirschi believed a youth needed to be attached to both parents. However, with the breakdown of the nuclear family, high rates of divorce, and other social realities, many youth find themselves in single-parent homes. My findings suggest that we may need to reconsider the hypothesis that youth must be attached to both parents, and how attachment functions as a protective factor for more serious forms of youthful offending. It seems only natural that youth who live with only one parent tend to develop a higher degree of attachment to that parent. The large number of youth in this sample who live in single parent households may account for the differences in the youth's attachment to their mothers and fathers.

In addition, it is interesting that youth who are more attached to their fathers are likely to be incarcerated for more serious offences. Hirschi's research findings support



the hypothesis that youth are more likely to be involved in delinquent behavior if they have weak attachments to their parents. Following in this tradition, I hypothesized that youth with weaker attachments to their parents were likely to have committed a more serious or violent offence. The research results did not support this hypothesis. Rather, no relationship was discovered between attachment to mother and offence seriousness, and the relationship between attachment to father and offence seriousness was in the unexpected direction.

It was initially hypothesized that the relationship between the attachment to father variable and offence seriousness may have been affected by the fact that 35.3% of youth in the sample have a father with a criminal record. Similar to Knight and Tripodi's (1996) research suggesting that detained youth develop strong social bonds to criminal parents<sup>1</sup>, I thought that this finding may support more of a differential association theory of crime, rather than a social control process. Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory suggests, in part, that individuals learn how to commit criminal acts through intimate interaction and communication with others. Based on this principle, I hypothesized that those youth with strong attachments to criminal fathers are more likely to become involved in more serious deviant behavior as they have internalized, from their father, definitions favorable to serious criminal behavior. Moreover, research on young offenders indicates that involvement with antisocial parents is one of the strongest predictors of involvement in serious and violent young offending (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). When I assessed this new hypothesis, however, I found that while there was no

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<sup>1</sup> 70% of youth in Knight and Tripodi's (1996) research had a parent with a criminal record.

relationship between attachment to criminal fathers and offence type ( $r = .121, n = 53, p = .194$ ), there was a significant relationship between attachment to fathers without a criminal record and offence seriousness ( $r = .291, n = 97, p < .01$ ).

Following from this, I propose an additional possible explanation for the finding that youth who are more attached to their fathers are likely to be incarcerated for a more serious offence. Similar to Rosenbaums' (1987) findings, it can be argued that the deterrent effects of parental reaction are not strong when youth become engaged in more serious and violent behavior because this type of behavior is predominantly impulsive. That is, youth who engage in more serious offences do not take the time, or do not have the time, to consider their parent's reaction to their behavior. In these instances, it is possible that the strength or weakness of the social bond is irrelevant. Furthermore, the possibility that attachment might be mitigated, in some cases, by factors such as impulsivity lend support to adopting a psychological variable, such as low self-control or allocentrism, into the social bonding model. For example, it may be that the deterrent effects of parental attachment is superseded by the fact that these youth lack a measure of self-control.

### **Attachment to Peers**

It is also interesting that no relationship was found between one's attachment to delinquent or criminal peers and involvement in more serious offending behavior. Hirschi's research discovered that the likelihood of being involved in delinquent behavior was strongly related to involvement with delinquent peers. One would, therefore, expect youth who had delinquent or criminal friends to be involved in more serious forms of official offending. This hypothesis is rejected by my research. In fact, my findings are

contradictory to much of the empirical research that contends that having antisocial peers is one of the strongest predictors of involvement in serious and violent young offending (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Contrary to the research literature in this area my findings suggest that there are no relationships between delinquent friends and offence seriousness. This may indicate that involvement with delinquent or criminal peers is only related to involvement in less serious forms of criminal behavior. Moreover, while my research assesses the number of delinquent or criminal friends a youth has, it might be useful to also examine the quality of those friendships.

### **Attachment to School**

While I was only able to assess the explanatory power of attachment to school for Aboriginal youth, the results indicate that there is no relationship between a weak attachment to school and involvement in more serious criminal behavior. The school is consistently cited as one of the more important protective factors for preventing involvement in young offending. Moreover, the relationship between attitudes towards school and problems at school, such as poor academic achievement and disliking school, and involvement in crime have been demonstrated in empirical research (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). The findings from my research are not indicative of the actual relationship between attachment to school and offence seriousness because many of the indicators used by Hirschi to assess this item were not used in the present study. While Hirschi used 6 items measuring attitude towards school, school performance, self-perceived academic competence, value placed on teachers opinions, and legitimacy of schools rules, I used only 2 indicators to assess a youth's attitude towards school and student teacher relationships. Indeed, no conclusion with respect to Hirschi's theory can

be drawn from this finding because it is not an accurate assessment of the attachment to school sub-construct.

### **Commitment to Conventional Lines of Action**

There were initially ten items used to assess commitment to conventional lines of action. After examining the items distributions, however, it was discovered that five of the items were severely skewed. This points to the problem of assessing a theory of delinquency on a sample of official young offenders. While one may obtain a reasonable distribution for indicators such as skipping school, drug use, alcohol use, and involvement in intimate relationships from a sample of high school youth, it is not expected that the same will apply to official young offenders. Since a large percentage of youth in the sample engage in these behaviors, it was impossible to include these variables in any further analysis. Clearly, removing these items from the analysis may have distorted the application of the commitment variable to this group of young offenders. Moreover, the results of this analysis may be even further distorted as two more variables were dropped because they did not correlate with the other variables. Therefore, out of the initial ten indicators used to assess commitment to conventional lines of action, only three were used in the final analysis.

While commitment should assess an individual's calculation of risk involved in committing more serious acts, what I assess is the age that youth become involved in drug use, alcohol use, and sexual relationships. While these items do not represent an accurate assessment of commitment, I hypothesized that youth who delay their involvement in these types of activities are involved in less serious offences. The results suggest that this is not the case. Due to the unforeseen manipulation of the commitment

data, however, it can be argued that this finding is not indicative of social bonding theory, but rather delayed involvement in delinquent behavior. The finding that youth who experience a later onset of involvement in drugs use, alcohol use, and involvement in sexual relationship are more likely than their counterparts to be incarcerated for a more serious offence may reflect a simple relationship between delayed involvement in deviant behavior and involvement in serious crime.

### **Control Variables**

The literature of social bonding reveals that females and Aboriginal youth are underrepresented in the research. In an attempt to compensate for the minimal research in these areas, my research introduces gender and ethnicity as variables in the assessment of social bonding and offence seriousness. For the most part, the findings show no considerable variation in social bonding as related to seriousness of offence when controlling for the aforementioned sub-groups. This finding may support the generality of social bonding theory by indicating that the variables do not apply differently for males and females, or for Aboriginals and Non-Aboriginals.

With respect to gender, the findings may indicate that, even though males and females are socialized in different ways, their patterns of socialization do not affect the applicability of social bonding theory. Moreover, the ability of social bonding theory to generalize to Aboriginal youth is especially important since it is hypothesized that Aboriginal youth have a higher frequency of weak or broken social bonds when compared to other youth. This is important because future research in this domain may reveal that a lack of sociological protective factors are responsible for the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in the Canadian youth justice system.

## **Policy Implications**

It is widely recognized that the serious and violent behavior of youthful offenders pose significant challenges to the criminal justice system and policy makers. It is further recognized that early intervention and prevention programs can reduce the likelihood of later involvement in serious and violent offending behavior. Based on my research findings, it may be advantageous to develop prevention and intervention policies aimed at non-aggressive interpersonal problem solving skills in youth. Conflict resolution programs that assist and ensure that youth develop and internalize the necessary skills to verbally, rather than physically, reduce their conflicts may serve as a protective factor against involvement in more serious offences. This recommendation is based on the notion that youth may not consider their parents' reaction to their criminal behavior because they are acting impulsively.

Because delayed involvement in substance use and sexual relationships is related to involvement in more serious offending, prevention and early intervention programs aimed at reducing involvement in these types of delinquent behavior may also be an effective strategy for reducing later involvement in more serious forms of criminal behavior. Drug and alcohol prevention programs may be valuable in preventing potential use of the substances, which might result in less youth involvement in more serious forms of offending behavior.

## **Future Research**

Knowledge of the degree to which a youth is bonded to prosocial or conventional institutions may assist in explaining youth involvement in more serious forms of official offending behavior. To address the problems identified in this present study, future

research must evaluate social bonding theory in a way that more closely mirrors Hirschi's original model, while addressing the severe lack of research on serious and violent young offenders, female young offenders, and Aboriginal young offenders. This type of research is necessary because, unlike samples of delinquents, serious and violent youth have higher rates of involvement in various types of offending behavior and suffer from a multitude of social and psychological problems. These inconsistencies need to be reconciled for Hirschi's theory to be considered a general theory of crime and to be useful in explaining and understanding serious and violent young offending.

While the larger study from which this data was drawn measures multiple pathways to more serious offending behavior, numerous variables were left out of this current assessment. A more complete test of Hirschi's model must consider variables, such as the role of psychological factors on the development of the social bond and its relationship to youthful offending. Moreover, an effective evaluation must also consider control variables, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, as they are important in assessing the generalizability of social bonding theory.

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## Appendix A

### UCR CATEGORIES

- 1 'Murder'
- 2 'Sex Offences'
- 3 'Assault'
- 4 'Robbery/Arson'
- 5 'Theft'
- 6 'Drug Offences'
- 7 'Escape/Breaches'
- 8 'Miscellaneous'

### CRIMINAL CHARGES:

### UCR CATEGORY

1 'Assault'	3
2 'Assault with Weapon'	3
3 'Aggravated Assault'	3
4 'Manslaughter'	1
5 'Murder1'	1
5.5 'Attempted Murder'	1
6 'Murder2'	1
7 'Breach of Probation'	7
8 'Breach of YOA'	7
9 'AWOL'	7
10 'Intimidation'	3
11 'Robbery'	4
11.5 'Attempted Robbery'	4
12 'Armed Robbery'	4
12.5 'Attempted Armed Robbery'	4
13 'Theft Under 1000'	5
14 'Theft Over 1000'	5
15 'Theft Under 5000'	5
16 'Theft Over 5000'	5
17 'Shoplifting'	5
18 'Break & Enter'	5
19 'Possession of Stolen Property'	5
20 'Grand Theft Auto'	5
21 'Conspiracy'	8
21.5 'Attempted Conspiracy'	8
22 'NCA-Traffic'	6
23 'Dangerous Operation of Motor Vehicle'	8
24 'Arson'	4
24.5 'Attempted Arson'	4

25 'Possession of a Weapon'	8
26 'Possession of Concealed Weapon'	8
27 'Forgery'	5
28 'Possession of B&E Instrument'	5
29 'Resisting Arrest'	8
30 'Extortion'	4
31 'Assault of Police Officer'	3
32 'Causing Disturbance'	8
33 'Trespassing'	8
34 'Sexual Assault'	2
35 'Sexual Assault w/ Weapon'	2
36 'Aggravated Sexual Assault'	2
37 'Failure to Appear'	7
38 'Driving Under the Influence'	8
39 'Mischief'	8
40 'Mischief Over 1000'	8
41 'Mischief Under 5000'	8
42 'Mischief Over 5000'	8
43 'NCA-Possession'	6
44 'Escape from Custody'	7
45 'Other Unclassified'	8
46 'Breach of Recognizance'	7
47 'Criminal Negligence Causing Death'	3
48 'Harassment/Stalking'	3
49 'Uttering Threats'	3
50 'Failure to Comply YOA'	7
51 'Assault Causing Bodily Harm'	3
52 'Failure to Stop'	8
53 'Prostitution'	8
54 'Obstruction of a Police Officer'	7
55 'Attempt Commit-Accessory'	8
56 'Taking MV'	5
57 'Fraud'	5
58 'Kidnapping'	3
59 'False Immigration'	8
60 'Unlawfully in Dwelling'	8
61 'Indecent Act'	2
62 'Breach of Motor vehicle Act'	8
63 'Impeding an Attempt to Save Life'	8
64 'Breach of Peace Bond'	7