

FAMILIES AND CRIME

by Travis Hirschi

Since the early 1970s, the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene, Oregon, has treated hundreds of families with "problem" children, children who bite, kick, scratch, whine, lie, cheat, and steal. As might be expected nowadays, this group of psychologists began with the assumption that the proper way to train difficult children is to reward their good deeds and ignore their bad ones.

The idea was, of course, that eventually the children would be so wrapped up in doing good that they would no longer consider evil. But after much struggling, the scholarly practitioners in Oregon came to the conclusion that children must be *punished* for their misdeeds if they are to learn to live without them.*

This conclusion may come as no surprise to millions of American parents who have spent years talking to their children, yelling at them, spanking them, cutting off their allowances, and in general doing whatever they could think of to try to get them to behave.

But the importance of parental discipline has been a rare notion among social scientists, especially those who deal with crime and delinquency. Criminologists tend to become interested in people only after they are capable of criminal acts. Not only is it then too late to do anything about their family situation; it is also too late to learn much about what their home life was like during the "child-rearing" years. As a result, we have many explanations of crime that implicate broad socioeconomic or narrow psychological factors but few that look to the family itself.

Thus, the Oregon group is swimming against the current, doing what few students of crime have had the time or inclination to do. They are actually going into the homes of families with potentially delinquent children and watching them in operation. And they are coming up with some not-so-revolutionary ideas.

In fact, the Oregon researchers start pretty much with the basics. They tell us that, in order for a parent to teach a child not

*See "Children Who Steal," by G. R. Patterson in *Understanding Crime* (Sage, 1980), edited by Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson.

to use force and fraud, the parent must (a) monitor the child's behavior, (b) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs, and (c) punish such behavior. This seems obvious enough. The parent who cares for the child will watch his behavior, see him doing things he should not do, and correct him. Presto! A socialized, decent human being.

Where might this simple system go wrong? It can go wrong in any one of four ways. Parents may not care for their child (in which case, none of the other conditions would be met); parents, even if they care, may not have the time or energy to monitor their child's behavior; the parents, even if they care *and* monitor, may not see anything wrong with their youngster's actions; and finally, even if everything else is in place, the parents may not have the inclination or the means to impose punishment.

I am impressed by the simplicity of this model. I believe it organizes most of what we know about the families of delinquents. I also believe that, when we consider the potential impact of any proposed governmental action on crime and delinquency, we should specifically consider its impact on the ability of parents to monitor, recognize, and punish the misbehavior of their children. A classic example is "full-employment policy."

If one asks professors of criminology why the youth crime rate is so high, or if one asks students in criminology courses why a particular group has an unusually high rate of crime, they will almost invariably mention "unemployment" or "underemployment." If one points out that homicide, rape, and assault do not typically produce much in the way of income, undergraduates can quickly figure out how to get to these crimes from job-



lessness by way of something like frustration or rage.

Thus, armed with the notion that people "turn to crime" only when nothing better is available, we ignore family considerations and, as best we can, try to provide good jobs for young people. What do we expect to happen? Employment of an adolescent would presumably not much affect his parents' ability to monitor his behavior. Teenagers are outside the home a good deal anyway, and the employer would to some extent act as a surrogate monitor. The parents' affection for their offspring may, if anything, be improved by his willingness to reduce the burden on his family, and work is certainly not going to affect the parents' ability to recognize deviant behavior. The only element we have left in our model of child-rearing is *punishment*. How, if at all, does the employment of a youth affect the family's ability to punish his deviant behavior?

A Minor Paradox

The power of the family in this situation will depend on the resources available to it relative to the resources available to the child. It will also depend on the child's aspirations. If the youngster wants to go to college at his parents' expense and to continue to drive the family Buick on weekends, and if he is really only picking up pocket money on the job, the damage to parental control is presumably minimal.

But if the child does not want to go to college, if his family does not own a car, and if the money he earns provides him a level of living which is equal or superior to that of his family, he is by definition no longer dependent on them. Affection and monitoring had better have done the job already, because the "child-rearing" days are over.

An outstanding feature of recent times has been the growing independence of adolescents from the family, made possible by expansion and differentiation of the labor market. This has resulted in an increased dependence of the teenager on other adolescents. But peers do not take the place of parents as socializing

Travis Hirschi, 47, is a professor of public policy at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Born in Rockville, Utah, he received a B.A. from the University of Utah (1957) and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley (1968). His books include Understanding Crime, with Michael Gottfredson (1980), Causes of Delinquency (1969), and Delinquency Research, with Hanan C. Selvin (1967). This essay has been adapted by the editors from a longer article in Crime and Public Policy, copyright © 1983 by the Institute for Contemporary Studies.

agents: They have little or no investment in the outcome, are less likely to recognize deviant behavior, and, most important, do not possess the authority necessary to inflict punishment.

Moreover, research that looks directly at juvenile delinquents offers no support for the notion that they are economically deprived when compared to other adolescents in their immediate area. On the contrary, young delinquents are more likely to be employed, more likely to be well paid for the work they do, and more likely to enjoy the fruits of independence: sex, drugs, gambling, drinking, and job-quitting.

By looking directly at the family, we are thus able to resolve one of the minor paradoxes of our time, the fact that crime is caused by affluence *and* by poverty. General affluence to some extent weakens the control of all families. It especially weakens the control of those families in which the adolescent is able to realize a disposable income equal to that of his low-income parents (or parent) almost from the day he finds a job. Unfortunately, life for him does not freeze at this point. His earnings do not keep up with the demands on them. Most offenders eventually show up on the lower end of the financial spectrum, thanks to the very factors that explain their criminality. Individuals who have not been taught to get along with others, to delay the pursuit of pleasure, or to abstain from violence and fraud simply do not do very well in the labor market.

Back to the Protestant Ethic

They do not do very well as parents, either. A 1977 study (*The Delinquent Way of Life*, by D. J. West and D. P. Farrington) concluded: "The fact that delinquency is transmitted from one generation to the next is indisputable." The authors found that fewer than five percent of the families they surveyed accounted for almost half of the criminal convictions in the entire sample.

Why should the children of offenders be unusually vulnerable to temptation? If we had the complete answer to this question, we would be much further down the road to understanding crime than we are. But we do have important clues. Recall that the model advanced above assumes that bad behavior is not something that parents have to work at *cultivating* but rather something that requires hard effort to *weed out*. Research shows that parents with criminal records do not encourage criminality in their children and are in fact as "censorious" of their illicit activities as are parents with no record of criminal involvement. But not "wanting" criminal behavior in one's children and being "upset" when it occurs, do not necessarily mean that

THE BEST OFFENSE . . .

In *The Death and Life of the American City* (1961), Jane Jacobs cited the anonymity of modern urban life as one of the chief causes of neighborhood crime. Not only had once tightly knit communities become unraveled, but people had left their stoops and gone indoors—lured by air conditioning and television, perhaps, or pushed by pollution, high-rise buildings, traffic congestion . . . and crime. No one was watching the streets. Ten years later, drawing on the ideas of Jacobs, Robert Ardrey, and others, Oscar Newman argued in *Defensible Space* (1972) that “people will defend themselves given the right physical framework”—an environment that provided a sense of “territoriality” and therefore enhanced “informal social control.”

During the 1970s, experiments in both “watching” and “defensible space” were conducted throughout the United States. The results, to judge from surveys by political scientist Charles Murray and the Police Foundation’s Lawrence Sherman, have not been a clear success.

The defensible-space strategy—brighter streetlights; windows in housing projects arranged to put more “eyes on the street”; local streets narrowed, routed, or blocked to discourage cruising “outsiders”; symbolic barriers (e.g., tree planters) to create semiprivate spaces that would generate possessive, protective community attitudes—appealed to city officials because it promised to reduce crime regardless of other factors (such as poverty or broken families). Housing projects or residential areas designed on defensible-space principles, like Clason Point and Markham Gardens in New York City and Asylum Hill in Hartford, came into fashion. Soon, defensible-space concepts were being applied to schools, commercial strips, and subway stations.

The demonstration projects, however, did not live up to expectations. At Clason Point, for example, crime did indeed decrease between 5 P.M. and 9 P.M., but it increased between midnight and 5 A.M. At Asylum Hill, robberies and burglaries decreased initially but then returned to “normal” levels. One problem, apparently, was that offenders, rather than steering clear, quickly learned to adjust to the new environment. Many of them, moreover, turned out to be not outsiders but insiders—community residents. Ironically, though, the *fear* of crime in Clason Point and Asylum Hill seemed to have lessened considerably, and researchers found optimistic signs of more “neighboring.”

great energy has been expended to prevent it. Criminal activity revolves around payoffs in the short run. There is thus little reason to expect offenders to be much interested in child-rearing, where gratification, as often as not, is delayed.

And indeed, according to research, supervision of offspring

In the end, Charles Murray concludes, the crime-reducing effects of defensible-space projects "depend crucially on the pre-existing social environment"—on the proportion of welfare families, the teen/adult ratio, whether or not residents own their apartments, length of residence, ethnic mix. Where crime is worst, he writes, defensible-space policies will have the least effect.

Experiments in "watching" have had a slightly better record. The Fairfax County, Virginia, police, for example, credit Neighborhood Watch with a 30 percent decrease in burglaries in the past year. The same pattern has been observed elsewhere. (Some five million Americans are involved in such efforts.) A study in Seattle revealed, however, that after an initial surge of enthusiasm, citizens tend to lose interest—and crime rates climb back up.

Another application of "watching" is preventive patrol. As Lawrence Sherman notes, most police officers cruise in squad cars: "What the patrol car officer sees is familiar buildings with unfamiliar people. What the public sees is a familiar police car with an unfamiliar officer in it." Patrol car officers are waiting to respond (the "dial-a-cop" strategy), rather than watching to prevent. In experiments in Newark and Kansas City, selected neighborhoods were provided with stepped-up *foot* patrols. While the patrols had no effect on serious crime, local residents told researchers that the patrolmen had reduced the incidence of lesser infractions—broken windows, drunkenness, panhandling—that tend to advertise the lack of "social control" in a neighborhood and thus to breed more serious crime. Since disorder has been shown by many studies to increase fear of crime, it appears that foot-patrol officers reduced fear by reducing disorder. And, because fear of crime is an important factor in the flight of businesses and families from central cities, reducing public fear is an important achievement in itself, one that might deter crime in the long run.

The foot-patrol experiments had another positive outcome: Foot-patrol officers were more satisfied with their jobs than those confined to automobiles.



Insignia of the country-wide Neighborhood Watch program.

in families where one or both parents has a criminal background is often "lax" or "inadequate" or "poor." Punishment tends to be "cheap": that is, short term (yelling and screaming, slapping and hitting) with little or no follow-up.

I suspect that a more subtle element of child-rearing is also

involved. This is the matter of recognition of deviant behavior. According to research at the Oregon Social Learning Center, many parents in "problem families" do not even *recognize* criminal behavior in their children. These parents may discount or ignore reports that their son or daughter steals on the grounds that they are unproved and should not be used to justify punishment.

As it happens, those parents, regardless of income, who succeed in crime prevention seem inclined to err in the direction of over-control, to see seeds of trouble in laziness, unreliability, disrespect for adults, and lack of concern for property. A catalogue of their attitudes could probably be entitled "The Protestant Ethic" or "Middle-Class Values."

Helping Parents Cope

Yet even a parent who knows what to do and has the will to do it may be hampered for other reasons. The percentage of the population divorced, the percentage of the homes headed by women only, and the percentage of unattached individuals in a community are among the most powerful predictors of crime rates. In most, but not all, studies that directly compare children living with both biological parents and children living in a "broken" or reconstituted home, the youngsters from intact families have lower rates of crime.*

Some reasons for this seem clear. For one thing, a single parent (usually a woman) must devote a good deal of time to support and maintenance activities, which often include holding down a job, that are to some extent shared in the two-parent family. She must do so in the absence of psychological and social support. And she is less free to devote time to monitoring and punishment. As early as 1950, a study by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck showed that mothers who worked, whether regularly or occasionally, were more likely to raise delinquent children than were women who did not work. This same report also revealed that the effect on delinquency of a mother working was *completely* accounted for by the quality of supervision she provided. When a mother was able to provide supervision for her children, her employment had no effect on the likelihood of delinquency.

The decline of the family is real enough. The extended household that was so effective in controlling everyone's behav-

*See, for example, "The Broken Home and Delinquent Behavior," by Karen Wilkinson in *Understanding Crime* (Sage, 1980), edited by Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson.

ior remains only in vestigial form; the nuclear family that replaced it does not have the stability and continuity it once had. One response, especially common among crime analysts, is to take note of these facts but to conclude that nothing can be done about them. Such neglect is reinforced by "modern" theories of crime, which assume that people are good by nature and that individuals would be law-abiding were it not for the flaws in the society around them.

This kind of stance toward the family is one I think we should avoid.

If nothing else, research on crime and the family may help prevent us from making a bad situation worse—for example, by adopting policies that, perhaps unwittingly, make the parents' job harder. And who knows what we may learn? It would be presumptuous to conclude in advance that studies of the family will have no useful application. The technique of child-rearing is not that complex, and someone may yet discover simple measures for improving the efficacy of parents in America as crime control agents. Since parents number in the millions, work for nothing, are stuck with the job, and usually prefer law-abiding children, they are a potential resource we cannot afford to ignore. Even modest bolstering of their role could result in large savings of time and money now devoted to correcting their mistakes.

