Original scientific article
UDC: 316.624:159.962.7(497.6)
DOI: 10.7251/SOCEN2627123K
COBISS.RS-ID 144506113
Paper received: 3 November 2025
Paper approved: 7 April 2026

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR APPLYING TRAVIS HIRSCHI'S SELF-CONTROL THEORY IN CRIME PREVENTION

Prof. Ljiljana Komlenović, Ph.D.[1]
Duška Zorić, MA[2]
Slobomir P University, Banja Luka

Abstract: Through a comparative analysis of surveys conducted in the area of the city of Banja Luka in two time periods (2012 and 2025), on a sample of three reference groups, we examined the significance of the concept of self-control theory for understanding criminal behavior, and thus the potential justification for applying this theory in crime prevention. According to the perceptions of the surveyed groups, increasing priority is being given to informal control over the formal system of control, thereby indirectly indicating its more significant influence on the development of self-control in early childhood. Since Hirschi's self-control theory itself emphasizes parenting as the exclusive cause of individual differences and the formation of low self-control, it appears that the concept of self-control also possesses its own heuristic value and the possibility of practical application in crime prevention, functioning precisely as an informal mechanism of crime control. By strengthening parenting, as well as other social bonds that shape our individual behavior at an early age, through an improved process of

[1] ljiljana.komlenovic@spu.ba
kom.ljiljana@gmail.com
[2] zoricduska@yahoo.com, Senior Teaching Assistant

systemic socialization, a preventive effect on the formation of low self-control would be achieved, and the need for intervention by the police and other agents of formal crime control would be reduced.
Keywords: self-control theory, socialization, crime prevention.

Introduction

The question of the etiology of criminal and delinquent behavior has always attracted the attention of both the broader public and the scholarly community. In the search for an answer to this question, a wide range of criminological theories has emerged, seeking to explain the causes of such behavior and to provide guidance for appropriate action. These numerous theories have been classified into groups: classical theories, positivist theories, theories of social reaction, newer criminological theories, and theories within criminology understood in a broader sense (Ignjatović, 2009:555). Although common sense often interprets theory as "everything that is the opposite of practice", changes in science frequently arise from scientific theories and only rarely from empirical observation of reality alone. Since the purpose of science is to "serve that magnificent phenomenon called life", the possibility of its practical application and realization in real life and practice may be considered its greatest achievement. Thus, theory must not be an end in itself; it should serve as a sound guide for state and social responses to criminal behavior. Its value is confirmed only when it can be empirically tested and verified. A useful illustration is Kurt Lewin's well-known dictum: "Nothing is so practical as a good theory." When a theory is firm and well founded, it is not abstract; rather, it provides a strong basis for understanding and solving real, practical problems and leads to effective action in practice, thereby linking theory and practice. Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) was a German-American psychologist considered the founder of social psychology. His psychological field theory explains human behavior as the product of an individual "life space" (person + environment).

Despite the abundance of theories, there is still no definitive answer regarding the causes of crime in the form of a general theory. Different theories approach the phenomenon from different perspectives and often offer different solutions; consequently, they have very different implications when applied to

communities and practice in the fight against crime. Researchers have become aware that explaining criminal behavior is far more complicated than previously thought, and they are often required to choose among competing theories (Burke, 2025).

Early criminological theories found the answer to the question of how crime emerges predominantly in the personality of the offender, whereas it is now known that the generators of crime are highly multilayered and also lie in society (Cajner Mraović, 2009b). The path from the grand theories of the twentieth century, which did not succeed in explaining crime in its entirety, "leads to an integrative approach, which today has primary importance in criminology and, judging by all indications, is the only approach with a future" (Simeunović-Patić, 2013:93–106). One such integrative model is represented by control theories, including self-control theory, which claims the opposite of earlier theories. In other words, these theories use ideas from previous theories to prove their own position and argue that factors of "constraint" and "control", and not only the personality of the offender, can prevent a person from committing a criminal offense, and that crime is the result of a failure of personal and social control.

One of the functions of scientific theories is the prediction of phenomena and laws that are potentially contained within the theory (Šešić, 1998:291–292). Theory is therefore not only a goal, but also a means of science: it is not only a system of knowledge, but also a means of acquiring new knowledge and of developing successful practice based on it. The fact that criminal and delinquent behavior produces numerous harmful consequences for society—material damage, physical injuries, social consequences and practical problems, as well as psychological reactions in the form of a subjective feeling of anxiety and fear of victimization, while also weakening trust in existing forms of social protection—has led scientific and professional discourse in criminal law to revolve for a long time around one central question: how can the occurrence of crime, and thus the consequences it produces, be reduced? There have, of course, been programs attempting to prevent criminal and delinquent behavior. However, most of them have not been grounded in theoretical understandings of what actually causes criminal and delinquent behavior. For example, D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) was not based on a clear understanding of risk factors for

drug use, but on the assumption that providing information about the dangers of drug use and asking minors to sign a pledge not to use drugs would reduce this form of delinquency. D.A.R.E. was an ambitious attempt at preventing substance abuse, but it faced criticism because of insufficiently proven effectiveness, although it continues to exist in many forms and communities; in preventive terms, it has been assessed as ineffective in deterring young people from drug use (Birkeland et al., 2005, cited in Nofziger and Rosen, 2017).

A preventive orientation, as a higher level of the fight against crime, requires that the causes of criminal behavior be scientifically investigated and explained, and that, as such, they serve as the foundation for framework strategies against particular forms of crime, from which action plans and laws may subsequently be adopted. A scientific approach necessarily implies a scientific theory as an explanation of the causes of criminal behavior and as a condition of research. This paper examines one theory—the basic premises of Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory—and considers how it may contribute to improving crime prevention. It is a relatively new criminological theory within the group of social control theories. Over time, it has become highly influential and is considered one of the three dominant theories of crime.

It is important to consider the possibility and justification of applying the insights of this theory for practical purposes, above all in early intervention and in limiting criminogenic potential, bearing in mind the substantial material and non-material consequences of criminal behavior. Even a modest reduction in criminal activity can generate economic benefits that significantly exceed the damage caused by criminal behavior (Komlenović and Rajić, 2023:313–329). In addition to material costs, non-material costs should also be considered when assessing the cost of crime to society, that is, as "all costs that would not have arisen had the punishable act not been committed" (Anderson, 2012:5).

Key Premises of Hirschi's Self-Control Theory

Dissatisfied with the explanation offered by social control theory—that delinquency occurs when the bond between the individual and society is weakened or broken—Travis Hirschi moved from social control theory to self-control theory and, together with Michael Gottfredson, published A General

Theory of Crime in 1990. Referring to the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, conducted on a sample of 1,144 children aged 12 to 13, they went a step further and showed that self-control theory explains delinquent behavior better than social control theory. Whereas Hirschi's earlier control theory (Causes of Delinquency, 1969) emphasized indirect control, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, 1993) gave primacy to direct control. They introduced self-control theory, that is, low self-control as a source of criminality. They define it as a stable personality trait that develops in early childhood and can be formed only in the first eight to ten years of life through the process of socialization with parents or guardians. They argue that it is almost entirely determined by parents, that it remains a lasting personality structure throughout adulthood, and that the quality of children's later interpersonal relationships, with both peers and other significant persons, depends on the relationship they have with their parents (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990:97–105).

They advocate the view that an individual is inclined to commit punishable acts because such acts bring pleasure and satisfaction: material gain, sexual gratification, excitement itself, and the like. A lack of self-control emerges when deviant behavior is not stopped over a certain period of time. Parents must be effective in cultivating self-control: the ability to restrain an individual's innate inclination toward quick and easy satisfaction of desires. A person must learn to think in the long term and to respect the interests of others. Gottfredson and Hirschi are not entirely clear about what kind of upbringing is required in order to be "effective" (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990:97–105). Nevertheless, during upbringing, self-control—or its absence—is formed by the age of eight, and a person who is only eight years old should already be subject to control in order to refrain from committing crime. This theory suggests that persons who experienced inadequate parenting before the age of ten develop less self-control than persons of approximately the same age who were raised with better parenting (Gottfredson, 2017).

Because the period up to the age of ten, to which self-control theory refers, includes not only parents, whom this theory identifies as the key factor in low self-control, but also other agents of socialization—peers, school, and the community—their role in the formation of self-control should not be neglected. If low self-control is not prevented through adequate socialization during this

key period, deviant behavior will result. The weaker the self-control, the more intense the manifestation of violent criminal behavior (Özbay and Köksoy, 2009:145–167).

Gottfredson and Hirschi understand crime broadly, not only as offenses prescribed by law, but also as other behaviors in which the interests of others are not respected ("careless, reckless, negligent, hazardous", and the like). For Hirschi and Gottfredson, if a person has low self-control and engages in such behaviors, one is dealing with a criminogenic personality, and if such persons have the opportunity, they will also engage in more serious criminal behaviors. They propose "self-control" as a general concept around which all known facts about crime can be connected, and argue that every unlawful activity is the manifestation of one basic cause: "low self-control", which can explain all forms of crime (George B. Vold et al., 1998). According to them, "this explanation is general and encompasses all crime; other explanations are not needed" (Flere, 2004:3).

Despite the fact that the authors of self-control theory themselves later denied some of their earlier positions and objections—the main objection being that there was no operational definition of self-control and that the theory was tautological—this theory has received considerable empirical support and stands at the very top in terms of its influence on criminological science (Pratt and Cullen, 2000:931–955). It appears justified and, on the basis of weak self-control, it is possible to explain various forms of criminal behavior. Bearing this in mind, self-control theory is a theory of choice, not a deterministic theory.

Characteristics of Persons with Low Self-Control

According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, persons with strong self-control are optimally adapted to the environment in which they live, achieve better results, and have a higher quality of life, whereas persons who lack self-control exhibit difficulties in socialization and social life: they strive for immediate gratification, such as smoking, drinking, drug use, illicit sex, and drunk driving. They are also insensitive, prone to risky behavior, insensitive to the needs of others, impulsive, characterized by a low threshold of tolerance for frustration, and persistent in such behavior regardless of its consequences. In this context,

they are more inclined to commit criminal offenses and other forms of deviant behavior. Low self-control also includes low physical and academic skills, egocentrism, indifference to the suffering of others, and minimal tolerance of frustration. By contrast, persons with high self-control are less likely ever to engage in criminal acts during their lives, because they are aware of the consequences that may follow if they commit criminal offenses (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990:89).

While the authors of self-control theory focused on its influence on criminal behavior, other authors have studied the concept of self-control in other aspects of human functioning. On the basis of a series of studies conducted by Tangney and associates (Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone, 2004:271–324), it was established that:

- weaker self-control may be both a cause and a consequence of certain psychological difficulties. Low self-control is one of the indicators of various mental disorders according to current international classifications, but it is also a consequence of a reduced capacity to control impulses, emotions, and behavior. The capacity for self-control is connected with the quality of interpersonal relationships;
- with regard to moral behavior, persons with a reduced capacity for self-control are unable to control their behavior and do not feel shame or guilt for their inappropriate conduct.

All these aspects of self-control may be connected with the manifestation of various forms of violent and therefore criminal behavior.

Agents of Social Control Influencing the Formation of Self-Control

Family

A general theory of crime argues that the level of self-control is determined in early childhood—when all children are, in a sense, in a state of low self-control—and then stabilizes between the ages of eight and ten. The family is therefore a logical place toward which efforts to develop this trait should be directed (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990:97).

The family is the first social environment with which a child comes into contact after birth, and it is the setting in which primary socialization takes place. Within the family, parents and guardians teach "social roles": what is right and what is not, how to behave toward others, educational choices, religious beliefs, and much else. The family is therefore crucial for instilling self-control.

The basic argument concerning how self-control develops, as explained by Gottfredson and Hirschi, has been examined in numerous studies. Decades of research on parenting and delinquent behavior have shown that the type of parenting affects the likelihood that a child will commit criminal offenses in the future. The dominant findings of studies indicate that parenting practices involving appropriate supervision and discipline significantly increase self-control. The best parenting style for improving self-control in children is one in which parents are affectionate toward their children, but also have high expectations and clear demands. Prosocial attachment is also important, because children may fear disappointing their family. As an example, Diana Baumrind's finding is cited: "authoritative parents who are highly responsive and demanding toward their child are best for child development. These parents have a stronger bond with their child, who needs support and control. This type of parenting is positively associated with social adjustment and negatively associated with misconduct and delinquency" (Baumrind, 1971:4).

Ineffective parenting practices are therefore the main factor determining the level of self-control. In order to create an adequate level of self-control, parents must: (1) monitor the child's behavior; (2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and (3) punish such behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990:97).

The influence of several other family-related parameters on the formation of self-control in children is also considered, such as the following (Nofziger and Rosen, 2017):

- supervision of children—what they do when they are at home and when they are outside the immediate direct control of parents—has been shown to increase self-control;
- single parenthood has been found to be more likely to influence children's deviance;

- family size, where a larger number of children results in greater delinquency;
- children are much more likely to engage in deviant behaviors if they have criminal parents;
- punishment practices, some of which are too harsh while others are too permissive.

Despite attempts to demonstrate the importance of the role of parenting in the development of self-control, more recent research argues that there is a need to consider other social influences as well, and that the role of the school in particular should be considered (Cullen et al., 2008:61–74).

School

In the view of Gottfredson and Hirschi, when parents fail to raise their child successfully, the school has the authority and the means to assist in the child's socialization. Schools monitor children's behavior, can easily recognize inappropriate behavior, and have mechanisms of punishment. However, it is likely that a child who has been unsuccessfully socialized by parents will not like school because of the restrictions within institutions, so proper socialization remains difficult. The influence of the school in determining the level of self-control is not as great as that of parenting practices, and parents should cooperate with teachers and other school representatives in order for the school to be more effective in forming a child's self-control. Regardless of whether the child is socialized through parents or through school, this must be achieved before the age of eight. After that age, the level of self-control rooted in the child will remain stable throughout life (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983:552–584). The effects of school are more significant for children from higher-risk families. More specifically, "school-based social efforts to increase self-control are successful only when the family has failed in its adequate socialization" (Turner, Piquero, and Pratt, 2005:327–339).

A program that targets both families and schools may be the most successful in creating high self-control by helping young people who may not receive adequate socialization in one of these environments. Because of the existing knowledge concerning the key role of parents and schools, and the

importance of the development of early self-control for long-term effects on behavior, family and school are logical places for the implementation of prevention programs aimed at increasing self-control.

Community

The community and neighborhood in which a person lives can influence the rate of delinquency. For example, suppose a person lives in a community in which everyone knows one another; such a prosocial bond may help prevent the commission of crime. Committing a criminal offense may mean disappointing or harming people from the community. Someone who is closely connected to their community would suffer more because of the commission of a crime than someone who feels no attachment to their community (Hirschi, 1969).

Media

Today, people are influenced by a multitude of information from various media: the Internet, mobile applications, television, radio, and others. It is especially important to understand the influence of media on children at the earliest age and on the formation of their attitudes. Media are developing very rapidly, so children become susceptible to them in the first years of life. In contemporary society, each new generation of children grows up in an environment increasingly rich in new media and media content. Accordingly, the influence on children changes, or more precisely, the perception of that influence changes (Ilišin, Bobinac-Marinović, and Radin, 2001:11). By shaping consciousness and social reality, media often violate the basic postulates of journalism and lead far more frequently to the formation of poor and unhealthy values than to positive children's habits and behaviors, especially when violent content is involved (Sefo, 2022:80).

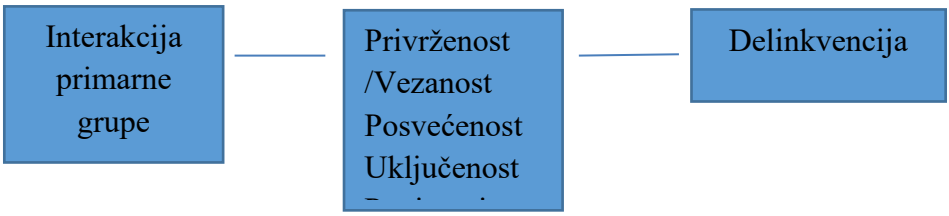
The way in which the media portray crime influences public opinion—attitudes toward crime and whether someone would engage in criminal activities or not—which is particularly important when children are concerned. In this sense, it is important to consider the possibility of preventive media

influence on the formation of attitudes at the earliest age, especially with regard to any form of violent behavior.

Social Bonds and Delinquency

From the perspective of social control, deviance may arise from the failure to establish social bonds or from the subsequent weakening of those bonds with society. Travis Hirschi identified four bonds that influence the attachment an individual feels toward society: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Siegel, 2007). He treated each of these elements of the social bond as equally important in terms of its influence on delinquency, which is also important to consider in the context of self-control theory.

Model formulated by Hirschi: social control theory in Causes of Delinquency.



Attachment

Hirschi identified attachment as the first and central social bond and as a persistent factor of possible deviance. This principle concerns our emotional bonds with others. Hirschi argued that strong, positive attachment to family, friends and teachers, or even to religious institutions, encourages us to comply with community norms. It is not merely fear of disappointing others, but also the valuing of their opinions and beliefs. The stronger the attachment, the more likely it is that we will follow the path of social conformity.

Children's emotional bonds with parents were weaker among offenders. From this we may conclude that attachment to family plays an important role in the socialization of children, as well as in maintaining their later conformity

toward others in society. These correlations are, of course, evidence of the importance of parental supervision.

Attachment to school is also an established predictor of delinquency. Children strive to be accepted by people who play a valuable role in their lives. Attachment is prosocial in its role of preventing people from committing crime. If a potential offender cares about no one, it is more likely that they will commit crime.

Commitment

Here Hirschi refers to a focus on conventional activities and goals. People must be engaged in whatever work they undertake. The more we commit ourselves to or invest in our education, career, or personal goals, the greater the stakes in maintaining socially acceptable behavior and the less likely we are to become involved in crime. This commitment acts as a deterrent to deviance because the potential cost of such behavior could jeopardize our hard-earned achievements.

On the other hand, when people commit themselves to nothing, they take greater risks and engage in criminal activities because they do not have much to lose. Engagement can be observed, for example, in a teenager who works hard in high school with the desire to be admitted to a prestigious university, bearing in mind the ultimate goal of a successful academic career. Researchers have found that students' grade point average explains why intelligence test scores correlate with delinquency (Schreck and Hirschi, 2009:305–311).

Participation/Involvement

This principle refers to our participation in traditional, socially approved activities, such as reading, playing sports, listening to music, watching television, and doing household chores, which occupy our time and energy and leave less room for deviant behavior. Among most of those who are involved in family or social activities, there is little or no room for crime, and, as Hirschi rightly pointed out: "A person may be simply too busy with routine matters and have no time to engage in abnormal behavior." The more engaged we are, the

less likely we are to go astray. Conversely, those who spend less time performing conventional activities may experience detachment from society and therefore have a greater chance of committing crime.

Belief

Beliefs are the values and ethical standards shared by a particular group of people. People who share values and beliefs respect the law and respect others. By contrast, those who are raised without any values and beliefs are more prone to unlawful behavior. If an individual believes in respecting social norms and rules, then it is less likely that they will commit acts that violate those rules. Classical theories of social control argue that the undesirable consequences of crime, including shame, social disapproval, or social dissociation, prevent most individuals from experiencing the consequences that result from wrongdoing. Hirschi actually argued that delinquents recognize that their deviant behavior is wrong.

Together, these four principles explain why most individuals choose to follow social rules. They are not merely external constraints; rather, they are internalized in our psyche and influence our everyday decisions and behaviors. From this, Travis Hirschi developed his social bond theory, which argued that the strength of a person's social bonds determines the likelihood of whether they will commit crime. From there, self-control theory was subsequently born, focusing particularly on the role of parenting in the development of self-control and, potentially, in reducing the likelihood of committing criminal offenses.

Reconciling the two Control Theories

Because social control theories are relatively newer criminological theories, they are more susceptible to criticism and re-examination. Thus, in his evaluation of social control theories, Akers observes that Gottfredson and Hirschi in 1990 did not clarify the relationship of self-control to Hirschi's 1969 social bond theory. The question arises whether Hirschi's 1969 position is compatible with Gottfredson and Hirschi's 1990 position, which gives rise to the essential question that is also crucial for explaining self-control in relation to the

topic of this paper: how does control of oneself relate to control through bonds with other people? It proves pragmatic to reconcile these two theories, as Marcus Felson did. Starting from Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and moving backwards, Felson sought to extract the best of Hirschi (1969) and combine it with the best of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), offering a good theory that would overcome generalized understandings of self-control and provide something qualitatively new regarding self-control. Accordingly, he divided self-control into segments (Muratbegović, 2004:112).

Dividing the Phenomenon of Self-Control into Segments

It is impossible to divide the population clearly into offenders and exemplary citizens. Marcus Felson proposes the use of an ordinary variable with five segments in order to present individuals concisely according to their level of self-control:

Level of self-control	Usual reaction to control by others
STRONGEST: 1	The person scarcely needs to be admonished.
2	Responds to anyone nearby.
3	Responds to particular people nearby.
4	Responds to immediate coercion.
WEAKEST: 5	Ignores immediate coercion.

This scale makes self-control theory somewhat simpler and easier to apply. The model connects two analytically distinct concepts: self-control and reaction to others. Those with more self-control may respond better to the influences exercised by others, whose proximity therefore becomes more relevant.

Segment 1 includes those with the strongest self-control, those who usually obey the rules of society with little or no admonition by others.

Segment 2 includes people who usually respond to informal social control exercised by almost anyone nearby.

Segment 3 includes people who do not have sufficiently high self-control to be easily influenced by the simple proximity of strangers. They usually respond well to immediate social influences from people whom they personally know. Hirschi's 1969 concept of social control fits best with members of Segment 3.

Segment 4 includes those who usually have enough self-control to respond to immediate coercion. Some young people obey the law only when police officers who can apply coercion are present and watching them.

Segment 5 lacks even that small amount of self-control. These are people who attack those stronger than themselves, strike police officers, and can hardly function in society, even as criminals. Members of Segment 5 probably end up in some institution for a large part of their lives, in one way or another.

Marcus Felson treated each individual as if they were located at a single point on the scale of self-control. However, each of the listed segments contains significant variations in reality; each individual varies considerably in self-control from hour to hour and from day to day. Alcohol and other intoxicants may temporarily move someone down the scale. Marcus Felson does not believe that a large percentage of the population belongs either to Segment 1 or Segment 5; rather, most of the population can be categorized into Segments 2, 3, and 4. Accordingly, he rotated and redrew the segment lines. Through Segment 3, this five-point scale combines Hirschi's 1969 control theory and the 1990 general theory of crime, closely connecting self-control with social interaction. Most of the population needs admonitions from others and then reacts to those admonitions. In this way, the segmentation of self-control proves to have its own heuristic value.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted in two time periods: Time 1, in 2012, and Time 2, in 2025. Following the model of an earlier study conducted in 2012 on a sample of three representative groups (Gudelj, 2012), we again examined the level of citizens' self-control and, through a comparative presentation, determined possible changes in respondents' perceptions concerning the level of self-control and its influence on criminal behavior between these two time

periods. In both time periods, the survey was conducted on a total sample of 75 respondents in the area of the city of Banja Luka: 30 respondents were students of the Faculty of Security, 25 were police officers, and 20 were citizens. The level of self-control of potential offenders was examined in relation to the dependent variable—the opportunity to commit a criminal offense—and in view of the degree of social control. The examination was conducted in July 2025 in the area of the city of Banja Luka. The results obtained through this survey are compared with the results of a survey conducted 13 years earlier, in 2012, for the purposes of empirical research in a graduate thesis on the same sample and in the same area (Gudelj, 2012).

The comparative indicators serve to re-examine the possibility and justification of the practical application of self-control theory in crime prevention by influencing the factors identified by the author of the theory as key. A limitation of the research is the relatively small sample of respondents. However, we were limited by the previous research and by the limited scope of this paper, which should be taken into account in future studies.

Analysis of the Results Obtained

The data obtained through the survey were processed using the method of statistical analysis and linked to the aim set for this research: to determine the influence of an individual's level of self-control on the decision to commit a criminal offense in view of the factors of social control.

The answers were graded on the basis of questions built around five levels of self-control:

1. I level: the respondent's assessment that a person would not commit a criminal offense, when the opportunity arises, if that person knows that no one is observing them; this concerns the most moral persons.
2. II level: a person would not commit a criminal offense when the opportunity arises if they see that there are other persons nearby whom they do not know.
3. III level: a person would not commit a criminal offense when the opportunity arises if they see that there are other persons nearby whom they know.

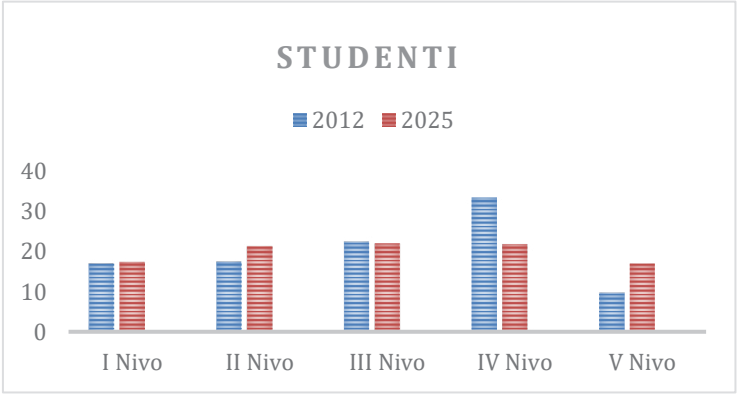
4. IV level: a person would not commit a criminal offense when a police officer is nearby.
5. V level: a person would commit a criminal offense even when the police intervene to prevent them from committing it; this concerns aggressive persons with a very low level of self-control who often come into conflict with the police.
6.

Students of the Faculty of Security and Protection

Table 1. Student responses to questions based on Hirschi's five levels of self-control – comparative overview

Year / Level of self-control	2012	2025	Difference in attitudes 2025/2012
I level	17.00%	17.4%	+0.4%
II level	17.50%	21.29%	+3.79%
III level	22.40%	22.00%	-0.40%
IV level	33.40%	21.81%	-11.59%
V level	9.7%	17.5%	+7.8%

Figure 1. Comparative Presentation of Students' Responses to Questions Based on Hirschi's Five Levels of Self-Control



From the presented indicators and the comparative overview, it is noticeable that the student respondents gave almost identical answers regarding Level I (personal self-control) and Level III (known persons) of self-control. Regarding Level II (an unknown person), in the repeated research the surveyed students considered the presence of another person whom they did not know as a reason for abandoning criminal behavior in a somewhat higher percentage (+3.79%).

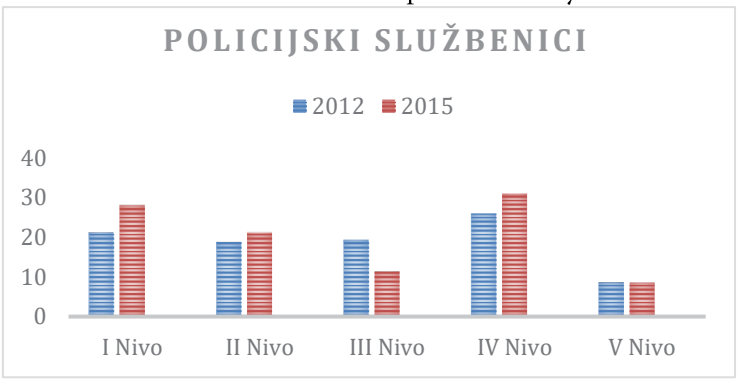
A significant change appears in students' attitudes regarding the presence of the police as a formal agent of control. A considerably smaller number of respondents "recognized" the factor of the mere presence of a police officer nearby (-11.59%) in a situation in which persons have the opportunity to commit a criminal offense. At the same time, in a significant percentage (+7.8%), they expressed the view that a person who had decided to commit a criminal offense would abandon their intention even if the police intervened and prevented them from doing so.

Police Officers

Table 2. Police Officer responses to questions based on Hirschi's five levels of self-control – comparative overview

Year / Level of self-control	2012	2025	Difference in attitudes 2025/2012
I level	26.16%	28%	+1.84%
II level	18.80%	21.25%	+2.45%
III level	19.36%	11.33%	-8.03%
IV level	25.94%	30.92%	+4.98%
V level	8.58%	8.5%	-0.08%

Figure 2. Police Officers' Responses to Questions Based on Hirschi's Five Levels of Self-Control: A Comparative Analysis



The presented indicators show that the largest number of police officer respondents, in an even higher percentage than before (+4.98%), confirmed the view from the previous research that a person will not commit a criminal offense if a police officer is nearby. An insignificant difference was shown in relation to the previous attitude regarding Level V (police intervention), amounting to -0.08%.

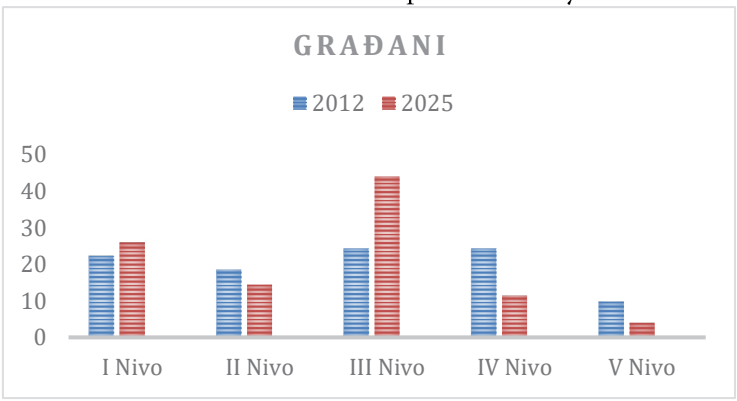
A more significant difference in the attitudes of this group of respondents was shown regarding Level III, the presence of known persons (-8.03%), while a more positive attitude was expressed regarding Level II, the presence of unknown persons nearby (+2.45%). They also expressed, in a somewhat greater number (+1.84%), the view that individual self-control is stronger.

Citizens

Table 3. Citizen responses to questions based on Hirschi's five levels of self-control – comparative overview

Year / Level of self-control	2012	2025	Difference in attitudes 2025/2012
I level	22.35%	26%	+3.65%
II level	18.60%	14.55%	-4.05%
III level	24.30%	44.02%	+19.72%
IV level	24.32%	11.43%	-12.89%
V level	9.92%	4%	-5.92%

Figure 3. Citizens' Responses to Questions Based on Hirschi's Five Levels of Self-Control: A Comparative Analysis



In response to the question posed to citizen respondents in relation to Hirschi's five levels of self-control, the greatest differences in attitudes are observed regarding Levels III and IV of self-control. A significant departure from the earlier research was expressed regarding Level III—the presence of persons whom the individual knows as a significant factor in abandoning the commission of a criminal offense (+19.72%). At the same time, compared with the earlier research, citizens expressed less trust (-12.89%) in the presence of the police in the immediate vicinity of a person who intends to commit a criminal offense. Citizens also expressed less trust (-5.92%) in police intervention itself as a factor deterring the commission of a criminal offense. Compared with the earlier research, citizens opted in a somewhat greater number (+3.65%) for Level I (self-control within the individual). Regarding Level II (the presence of an unknown person), citizens selected this factor less frequently (-4.05%) than in the previous research.

Discussion

Anonymous questionnaires collected data on the perceptions of relevant groups concerning the self-control of individuals in view of the type of social control. The results show that the degree of an individual's self-control is significantly influenced by factors of social control. According to the survey

results, students and citizens stated that they attach greater importance to informal agents of control—the presence of known and unknown persons—than to the presence of the police as a formal agent of control, even in the case of police intervention. Only the surveyed police officers attached greater importance to the presence of the police and to police intervention as factors deterring the commission of criminal offenses. These results suggest general support for self-control theory in the sense of preventive influence on the key factors in the formation of self-control identified by this theory: primarily parents, but also other factors of social control, such as school, media, and community, which are important agents of children's socialization at the earliest age, up to the age of ten.

Conclusion

On the basis of the research results, we have reached the conclusion that, according to the perceptions of the surveyed groups, greater importance is attached to the system of informal control than to the formal system of crime control, and thus greater trust is placed in the possibility of timely prevention of low self-control as a significant criminogenic predisposition at the earliest age, before criminal behavior manifests itself and before formal mechanisms of society become involved. It follows clearly that societies should focus their fight against crime not on the existing criminal-law, punitive practice—after the act has already occurred and its consequences have manifested themselves—but on social agents of control directed toward the development of self-control in early childhood, above all in the domain of improving parenting during the phase of the child's primary socialization. It therefore appears that theoretical elaboration and understanding of the formation of self-control, in the manner emphasized by the author of self-control theory, may be useful in crime prevention as a more advanced and less costly way of countering this negative social phenomenon. It is in the best interest of society to invest in children while they are small, when the possibilities for developing self-control are greatest.

References

Akers, R. L., & Jensen, G. F. (2008). The empirical status of social learning theory of crime and deviance: The past, present, and future. In F. T. Cullen & J. P. Wright (Eds.).

Anderson, D. A. (2011). The cost of crime. Foundations and Trends in Microeconomics, 7(3), 209–265.

Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. Developmental Psychology Monograph, 4, 1–103. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0030372

Burke, P. (2025). Povijest i društvena teorija (2nd ed.). Cornell University Press.

Charlotte Nickerson & Saul McLeod. Hirschi's Social Control Theory of Crime. Simply Psychology, updated February 13, 2024.

Cajner Mraović, I. (2009b). Prevencija kriminaliteta u lokalnoj zajednici – strategija primjene znanosti i iskustva dobre prakse. Zagreb: Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske.

Flere, S. (2004). Granice samokontrole u objašnjenju kriminalnosti. Teme – časopis za društvene nauke, Univerzitet u Nišu.

George B. Vold et al. (1998). Theoretical Criminology (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). A General Theory of Crime. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gottfredson, M. (2017). Self-control theory and crime. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Grasmick, H., Tittle, C., Bursik, R., & Arneklev, B. (1993). Testing the core empirical implications of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 30, 5–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427893030031002

Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1993). Commentary: Testing the general theory of crime. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 30, 47–54.

Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1994). The Generality of Deviance. New Brunswick–London: Transaction Books.

Hollander-Blumoff, R. (2012). Crime, punishment and the psychology of self-control. Emory Law Journal, 61(3), 501.

Ignjatović, Đ. (2009). Teorije u kriminologiji. Belgrade: Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade.

Ilišin, V., Bobinac-Marinović, A., & Radin, F. (2001). Djeca i mediji: Uloga medija u svakodnevnom životu djece. Zagreb: Državni zavod za zaštitu

obitelji, materinstva i mladeži; Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu.

Komlenović, Lj., & Rajić, T. (2023). Koliko košta kriminalitet iz vizure zatvorskog sistema? – U prilog potrebi promjene paradigme u borbi protiv kriminaliteta. Scientific conference Bezbjednosni izazovi, rizici i prijetnje u procesu nastajanja novog svjetskog poretka, Independent University Banja Luka, Faculty of Security and Protection.

Muratbegović, E. (2004). Prevencija kriminaliteta (skripta). Sarajevo: Faculty of Criminal Justice Sciences.

Özbay, Ö., & Köksoy, O. (2009). Is low self-control associated with violence among youths in Turkey? International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 53(2), 145–167.

Pratt, T., & Cullen, F. (2000). The empirical status of Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime: A meta-analysis. Criminology, 38.

Sefo, M. (2022). Uvod u komunikologiju. Sarajevo: Perfecta.

Nofziger, S., & Rosen, N. L. (2017). Building Self-Control to Prevent Crime.

Simeunović-Patić, B. (2013). Teorija situacijskog postupanja: postavke, značaj i perspektive. Nauka, bezbednost, policija, 18(2), 93–106.

Siegel, L. J. (2007). Criminology: Theories, Patterns, and Typologies (9th ed.). USA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Schreck, C. J., & Hirschi, T. (2009). Social Control Theory. In J. M. Miller (Ed.), 21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook (pp. 305–311).

Šešić, B. (1998). Opšta metodologija. Belgrade: Naučna knjiga.

Tangney, J. P., Baumeister, R. F., & Boone, A. L. (2004). High self-control predicts good adjustment, less pathology, better grades, and interpersonal success. Journal of Personality, 72(2), 271–324. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00263.x

Turner, M. G., Piquero, A. R., & Pratt, T. C. (2005). The school context as a source of self-control. Journal of Criminal Justice, 33, 327–339.

Wikström, P.-O., & Treiber, K. (2007). The role of self-control in crime causation: Beyond Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime. European Journal of Criminology, 4, 237–264.