

At the End of Their Rope: A Research Note on the Influence of Parental Low Self-Control and Juvenile Delinquency on Parental Exasperation

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Abstract

The concept of self-control has been used to account for a wide variety of outcomes, both criminal and otherwise. Recently, researchers have started investigating associations between parental self-control and family functioning. This study expands this area of research by assessing the extent to which parental low self-control and official involvement in juvenile delinquency is associated with parental exasperation among a sample of parents ($N = 101$) whose children have been processed through a juvenile justice assessment facility.

The implications of the study and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords

self-control, parental exasperation, juvenile delinquency, juvenile justice system, official records

Since its inception 25 years ago, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory has been widely tested, debated, and scrutinized (see Hay & Meldrum, 2015). At its core, the theory centers on the concept of low self-control, with Gottfredson and Hirschi arguing that, "... people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 90). Understandably, given that the primary focus of the theory is

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providing an explanation for delinquent and criminal behavior, the majority of research testing it has focused on illegal behavior. However, many researchers have sought to expand the boundaries of the theory by investigating other outcomes that might be explained by a lack of self-control.

Considering the elements of low self-control as described by Gottfredson and Hirschi, it is perhaps not surprising research finds low self-control is associated with a wide variety of undesirable outcomes. These include, among other things, exposure to criminal victimization (Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014), poor physical and mental health (Miller, Barnes, & Beaver, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011), financial instability (Moffitt et al., 2011), and problems within interpersonal relationships (Vohs, Finkenauer, & Baumeister, 2011). Pertinent to the focus of the current study, a growing body of research has investigated the implications of self-control for family functioning by focusing on *parental* self-control and the attitudes and behaviors of parents.¹ In this regard, recent research finds that parents who are lower in self-control are less likely to employ effective parenting practices, such as monitoring and discipline (Meldrum, Connolly, Flexon, & Guerrete, 2015; Meldrum, Young, & Lehmann, 2015; Nofziger, 2008; Verhoeven, Junger, Van Aken, Deković, & Van Aken, 2007); less likely to be involved with and show affection toward their children (Boutwell & Beaver, 2010); and more likely to report the potential for engaging in child abuse (Henschel, de Bruin, & Möhler, 2014).

Yet, there are notable gaps in this area of research given its infancy. One gap which we focus on in this study is the potential role that parental self-control plays within families of adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system (JJS). In particular, there is accumulating evidence that many parents of juvenile offenders report feelings of exasperation with regard to their child (Cook & Gordon, 2012; Glaser, Calhoun, & Puder, 2005; Rose, Glaser, Calhoun, & Bates, 2004). Rose, Glaser, Calhoun, and Bates (2004, pp. 34–35), who were the first to empirically measure parental exasperation, state the construct taps into the extent to which a parent has “had it up to here with this child.” Expounding on this, Cook and Gordon (2012, p. 212) state that parental exasperation embodies “feelings and thoughts of anger, despondence, and hopelessness as felt by the parent/guardian in reference to the child.”

Given the emotional and financial toll adolescent involvement in serious delinquency can take on families, it might be expected, as early research has found, that parental exasperation is more frequently reported by parents whose children engage in greater delinquency (Bradshaw, Glaser, Calhoun, & Bates, 2006). Research also points to the possibility that parental exasperation is positively associated with future juvenile offending (Glaser et al., 2005), though a more recent study failed to replicate this finding (Cook & Gordon, 2012). Still, with so few studies having investigated the causes and consequences of parental exasperation, there is a clear need for additional research. We believe it is in this regard when focusing on the causes of parental exasperation that parental self-control may play a critical role.

Given what is known about individuals who are low in self-control, it seems likely that parental low self-control would be positively associated with a greater likelihood of reporting feelings of exasperation. Parenting requires patience, diligence, and frequently placing the needs and desires of children ahead of one’s own needs. Accordingly, parents who are self-centered, shortsighted, and impulsive (key elements of low self-control) should arguably be less likely to report wanting to persist in their parenting responsibilities when the behavior of their child has become so problematic that it has attracted the attention, sometimes repeatedly, of the JJS. Considering this potential association between parental low self-control and parental exasperation is important for at least two reasons. First, doing so expands the applicability of self-control theory and what it can be used to explain by focusing attention on the implications of low self-control during adulthood. Second, and perhaps more important, it focuses attention on the behavior and attitudes of parents of juvenile offenders in addition to juveniles themselves, something which several researchers have noted is sorely needed in juvenile justice research (Bradshaw et al., 2006; Glaser et al., 2005).

In addition to a focus on parental low self-control as a potential contributor for understanding variation in parental exasperation, it is reasonable to expect that the more involved an adolescent is in the JJS (i.e., has a more extensive history of arrests and charges), the more likely a parent would be to report feelings of exasperation.² Involvement in the justice system likely contributes to feelings of anger, frustration, and disappointment by parents. Moreover, it frequently requires a significant amount of time, energy, and money on the part of parents to, among other things, make sure their child appears in court and satisfies certain court-mandated conditions such as drug testing and counseling. Other complications, such as having to take time off from work to deal with the aforementioned responsibilities, may further contribute to feelings of exasperation on the part of parents.

Given the above discussion, we seek in this study to test the hypothesis that parental low self-control and the extent of adolescent involvement in the JJS will each be positively associated with parental reports of exasperation with regard to their child. In addition to assessing the independent effects of these variables on parental exasperation, we test a second hypothesis: The effect of parental low self-control on parental exasperation will be conditioned by the extent of adolescent involvement in the JJS. Specifically, we anticipate the effect of parental low self-control on parental exasperation will be *stronger* for parents whose children have had *greater* involvement in the JJS, as indicated by the number of charges they have accumulated.

Method

Data and Procedures

To test the above hypotheses, original data were collected from two sources. First, survey data were collected from parents of juveniles processed through a juvenile justice assessment facility in a rural county located in the southeastern United States from September 2013 to July 2014. Second, it draws on official records pertaining to the juveniles whose parents completed the survey questionnaires. Upon obtaining appropriate institutional review board approval and support from administrators at the facility to conduct the study, one of the research team members, who works at the facility as a senior juvenile probation officer, invited parents to participate in a study focused on understanding the factors that contribute to delinquent behavior by their children. Invitations to participate took place when parents came to pick up their child from the facility after being processed for one or more law violations (prior to being prosecuted), or during conferences that are periodically held with parents whose children have been placed on home detention.³ When more than one parent came to the facility, it was specified that only one parent needed to complete the survey questionnaire, which was typically done by mothers. Parents were told that participation was voluntary, that in no way would choosing or refusing to participate have an impact on the treatment and disposition of their child's current charges or probation requirements, and that participation required two things: (1) the completion of a 15- to 20-min survey questionnaire and (2) for the research team member who worked at the facility to access their child's information from a JJS database in order to obtain demographic data on their children and information on the number and type of charges their child had accumulated.⁴

The research team member who works at the facility and invited parents to participate in the study is only one of several staff members who regularly hold conferences with parents of juvenile offenders placed on home detention or who processes juveniles out of the facility when parents come to pick them up after an initial charge is made. As a result, the sample is one of convenience, and invitations for parents to participate only took place as time allowed or when the research team member was present at the facility at the time conferences took place or children were picked up. With these caveats in mind, of the 174 parents who were invited to complete the survey and asked to

consent to having the research team member access the official records of their children, 103 completed the survey and consented, producing a participation rate of 59%. An outlier analysis led to the exclusion of 2 cases, making the analytic sample size of 101 cases. We recognize the small and nonrepresentative nature of the sample limits the generalizability of findings stemming from the analysis to be presented and comment on this issue in greater detail later in the article.

Measures

Parental low self-control. Each participating parent was asked to respond to 9 items from the Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, and Arneklev's (1993) self-control scale about themselves. These items were: "I sometimes act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think"; "I sometimes do what brings me pleasure here and now, even at the cost of some distant goal"; "I am more concerned with what happens to me in the short run than in the long run"; "Sometimes I will take a risk just for the fun of it"; "I sometimes find it exciting to do things for which I might get in trouble"; "Excitement and adventure are more important to me than security"; "I try to look out for myself first, even if it means making things difficult for other people"; "I am not very sympathetic to other people when they are having problems"; and "I will try to get things I want when I know it is causing problems for other people." For each of the items, responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). For the analysis, the items were averaged together, with higher values representing *lower* parental self-control ($\alpha = .92$; average interitem $r = .55$). The descriptive statistics for this measure and all other measures to be described, along with their intercorrelations, are reported in Table 1.

Juvenile delinquency. To measure the extent of involvement in the JJS, official records were consulted to ascertain the *total number of felony and misdemeanor charges* that each juvenile had accumulated in his or her lifetime; we refer to this measure throughout the remainder of the article as an indicator of juvenile delinquency. The research team member who accessed the JJS database in order to obtain this information has knowledge of the types of adolescents who are processed through or visit the facility and, important for the analysis, a variety of juveniles pass through the facility, from those who have been brought in for first-time misdemeanor offenses (e.g., getting into a fight at school) to those who have rather extensive histories of delinquency (i.e., repeat felony charges). As shown in Table 1, there was good variability in the count of misdemeanor and felony charges, with a range from 1 to 22 (mean = 4.36, $SD = 3.92$).

Parental exasperation. The measure for parental exasperation used for the current analysis was adapted from Cook and Gordon (2012) and the Juvenile Offender Parent Questionnaire (JOPQ) developed by Rose et al. (2004). For the current study, parents were asked to respond to 6 items: "My frustration with my child interferes with my relationship with him or her," "I feel like giving up on my child," "When it comes to my child I feel hopeless," "Sometimes I wonder if my child should live somewhere else," "I am angry with my child," and "I get so frustrated with my child that I cannot deal with him or her." For each of the items, responses ranged from *completely false* (1) to *completely true* (4). For the analysis, the items were averaged together, with higher scores representing *greater* parental exasperation ($\alpha = .92$; average interitem $r = .67$).

Demographic and control variables. Information on the age, race, and sex of each parent who participated was collected through the survey questionnaire. Age was self-reported in whole years. Overwhelmingly, mothers are the ones who came to the facility to pick up their kids or attend conferences (84%). We chose to exclude parental sex from the analyses, given that including it in the analyses had no bearing on the results. Approximately 50% of the parents were African American, with less than 10% indicating they were a member of another minority group. Thus, for the analysis, parental

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Juvenile age	15.67	1.63	11.1	17.9								
2 Juvenile sex (<i>male</i> = 1)	0.78	—	0	1	-.05							
3 Juvenile delinquency	4.35	3.92	1	22	.12	.05						
4 Parent age	41.03	8.75	28	70	.24*	-.10	-.11					
5 Parent race (<i>non-White</i> = 1)	0.56	—	0	1	-.15	.12	.29**	-.15				
6 Parental job loss (<i>yes</i> = 1)	0.25	—	0	1	.10	.08	.15	-.14	.04			
7 Parental breakup (<i>yes</i> = 1)	0.45	—	0	1	.08	-.01	.11	-.12	-.06	.22*		
8 Parental low self-control	1.62	0.65	1.00	3.44	.14	-.01	.45***	-.34***	.10	.38***	.11	
9 Parental exasperation	1.98	0.87	1.00	4.00	.23*	.06	.55***	.03	.01	.40***	.30**	.52***

Note. $N = 101$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

race was dichotomized (*White* = 0, *non-White* = 1). Information on the age, race, and sex of the juveniles was obtained from the same JJS database as the information on delinquency. Age was computed to the hundredths of a year. Given the near perfect correlation between parental race and child race ($r = .94$), child race is not included in the analysis. The sex of each child was coded such that females were assigned a value of 0, while males, who comprised the majority of the sample, were assigned a value of 1.

In addition to the above demographic variables, we included two additional variables pertaining to events that parents reported experiencing (or not) within the 12 months prior to completing the survey questionnaire. First, each parent was asked whether they or their spouse had been fired or laid off from a job (*no* = 0, *yes* = 1). Second, each parent was asked whether they had experienced marital separation, divorce, or the breakup of a steady relationship (*no* = 0, *yes* = 1). Given that losing a job or ending a romantic relationship can be stressful for anyone, it is possible that recent events such as these could contribute to parental exasperation—stress in other domains of life could contribute to feelings of frustration and anger with one's child. As such, including these two measures in the analyses can shed additional light on the causes of parental exasperation above and beyond parental low self-control and juvenile delinquency.

Results

To investigate our first hypothesis concerning the potential influence of parental low self-control and juvenile delinquency on parental exasperation, we employed ordinary least squares regression, given that parental exasperation is measured as a continuous variable with little skew (0.53).

Table 2. OLS Regressions: Effects of Juvenile Delinquency, Parental Low Self-Control, and Control Variables on Parental Exasperation.

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>
Juvenile age	.05	.04	.08	.02	.04	.04
Juvenile sex (<i>male</i> = 1)	.09	.16	.04	.14	.15	.07
Juvenile delinquency	.12***	.02	.52	.09***	.02	.40
Parent age	.01	.01	.11	.02**	.01	.21
Parent race (<i>non-White</i> = 1)	-.20	.14	-.11	-.17	.13	-.10
Parental job loss	.59***	.16	.29	.41*	.16	.20
Parental relationship breakup	.32*	.14	.18	.35**	.13	.20
Parental low self-control				.43***	.12	.32
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²			.44			.50
<i>F</i> -statistic	12.35***			13.64***		

Note. *N* = 101. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; *B* = standardized regression coefficient; OLS = ordinary least squares.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001 (two-tailed).

To investigate our second hypothesis concerning the potential conditional effect of parental low self-control on parental exasperation across levels of juvenile delinquency, we employed a split-sample analysis. Specifically, the sample was split between those parents whose children had less involvement in delinquency (three or fewer charges) and those parents whose children had greater involvement in delinquency (four or more charges).

Table 3. Split Sample OLS Regressions: Effect of Parental Low Self-Control on Parental Exasperation Across Juvenile Delinquency.

Predictors	Model 1: Low Delinquency (one to three charges; $n = 56$)			Model 2: High Delinquency (four plus charges; $n = 45$)		
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>
Juvenile age	.08	.05	.21	-.10	.08	-.15
Juvenile sex (<i>male</i> = 1)	.04	.19	.03	.51 [†]	.28	.22
Parent age	.01	.01	.16	.04***	.01	.34
Parent race (<i>non-White</i> = 1)	-.23	.17	-.17	.11	.23	.06
Parental job loss	.38 [†]	.21	.23	.29	.26	.14
Parental relationship breakup	.28	.17	.21	.40	.25	.21
Parental low self-control	.26	.17	.20	.77***	.17	.60
Adjusted R^2			.25			.47
F-statistic		3.63**			6.60***	
Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, and Piquero (1998) Z-test for equality of effect of parental low self-control across Model 1 and Model 2:				Z = -2.10*		

Note. *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; *B* = standardized regression coefficient; OLS = ordinary least squares.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

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Notes

1. There is a rich literature examining whether parenting practices are consequential for child self-control (see Botchkovar, Marshall, Rocque, & Posick, 2015), but our focus here is on the self-control of parents. As such, we do not review the literature examining the association between parenting practices and child self-control.
2. Bradshaw and colleagues (2006) found evidence of this association when measuring adolescent violence and delinquency using parent reports, but without necessarily claiming a particular causal order. Here, we contend that the direction of influence flows from the extent of adolescent involvement in the juvenile justice system to parental feelings of exasperation when the two variables are assessed contemporaneously. The argument is that

parental reports of exasperation reflect how parents feel *at that moment*, whereas a measure of adolescent involvement in the juvenile justice system reflects an accumulation of *past* arrests, charges, and convictions. We address this issue further in the discussion section after presenting the results of our analyses.

3. The parents who were invited were not necessarily parents whose children were under the direct supervision of the research team member; some of the participating parents had children who were under the supervision of other probation officers at the facility. Simply put, whenever the research team member was at the facility, and as time allowed, parents who were at the facility to pick up their children after processing, or who were there for a regularly scheduled conference with their child's probation officer, were invited to participate.
4. The research team member had regular access to this information given his position at the facility, and the administrators (and the parents) authorized allowing this individual to access the juvenile justice system (JJS) database to obtain the demographic information on the juveniles and information on the number of misdemeanor and felony charges for each juvenile in order to conduct the study. After accessing the JJS database, this information was added to the data file containing the survey data collected from the parents. At this point, no unique identifiers (the juvenile's name, JJS number, address, etc.) were included in the data file in order to protect the identity of participants.
5. The decision was made to split the sample at "three or fewer charges" and "four or more charges" because this produced the closest even split with regard to sample size.