Social Control Theory emerged in the 1950s and has since become the most influential and empirically researched theory of crime and deviance. Social control and self-control theories refer to clusters of theoretical positions that indicate the presence or absence of control to be the major factor in explaining why some people offend while others do not. Such theorists suggest that (a) offenders lack external social controls, internal self- or personal controls, or both, and (b) crime and deviance can be better explained by focusing on variations in social restraints on people’s behavior rather than on individual social or cultural differences in their motivational impulses. This emphasis on restraints sets social control theory apart from other theories in that the motivation to engage in socially disapproved behaviors is not abnormal, but ordinary and universal. While early efforts at developing social control theory are almost universally analyses of juvenile delinquency, the systematic application of this theory to adults does not occur until the 1990s, most notably in the “life course” adaptation of the theory.

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