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PRE-PRINT VERSION

**LOW SELF-CONTROL AND CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM  
IN A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF MALES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Prior research on law enforcement and court system actions suggests that offender demeanor influences practitioner decisionmaking. However, few studies have examined a key implication of this body of work—namely, criminogenic factors associated not only with offending but also with demeanor may result in a greater likelihood of contact with and formal processing by law enforcement and the courts. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we test the hypothesis that low self-control, which is associated with a range of characteristics that might influence practitioner perceptions of individual offenders' demeanors, will predict greater contact and formal processing. Briefly, we found that low self-control was consistently related to criminal justice system involvement as measured by police contacts, arrests, age at first police contact, and arrest onset. The implications of the findings for theory and research are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** self-control, arrest, police contacts, offender, general theory

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent criminological theories to emerge in recent decades is self-control theory. Since the publication of Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's *A General Theory of Crime* in 1990, the theory has, for example, been cited nearly 2,500 times and been the focus of more than 200 studies. Despite a considerable body of work aimed at testing the theory, much of which finds support for it, relatively few studies have examined a key implication of the theory for the criminal justice system. Specifically, the very factor that the theory argues should give rise to crime—low self-control—is one that may very well confer a greater likelihood of being caught and sanctioned. According to the theory, for example, individuals low in self-control are more likely to exhibit a range of characteristics—being impulsive, tardy, insensitive, hot-tempered, and self-centered, to name but a few—that might well bode ill for them during interactions with law enforcement and during court proceedings. Indeed, DeLisi and Berg (2006) speculated that self-control was likely related to interactions between offenders and criminal justice personnel and potentially affected criminal justice outcomes:

Self-control theory may provide a linkage between the discretionary behavior of police, court officers, and correctional staff. *Persons with low self-control are short-tempered and generally unlikable, and it is possible that practitioners across criminal justice agencies are generally responding to this disagreeable, negative trait.* This might explain continuity in criminal justice experiences for various types of offenders. For example, offenders with exceedingly low self-control might consistently antagonize police, court officers, and correctional staff. (p. 159; emphasis added).

Juxtaposed against this observation is the fact that policing and sentencing studies typically suggest that how individuals present themselves or how they appear can influence such decisions as whether to arrest or convict someone and whether the person should, more generally, be targeted for formal or tougher processing (Klinger, 1994; Mears, 1998; Mastrofski, Reising, & McCluskey, 2002; Miller, Miller, & Barnes, 2007). Certainly, actual or perceived race or ethnicity is one such dimension (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Eberhart, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006), but so, too, might an individual's behaviors, or, more generally, self-presentation when confronted by the police, prosecutors, or courts. That, in fact, is one of the primary arguments for why individuals with mental illnesses are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Hirschfield, Maschi, White, Goldman-Traub, & Loeber, 2006). The notion that demeanor may influence processing decisions holds more sway when we consider young offenders, who typically could be or are processed in the juvenile justice system, which is guided by a mandate to be more lenient in cases where youth clearly seem amenable to rehabilitation (Feld, 1999; Leiber & Mack, 2003; Kupchik, 2006).

A critical question arising from these two bodies of work is whether individuals with lower levels of self-control are, in fact, more likely to be arrested and, if arrested, to be convicted relative to individuals with higher levels of self-control. To the extent that such decisions flow purely from consideration of legal factors, there should be little to no association; to the extent that extra-legal factors like self-control influence demeanor and in turn criminal justice decisionmaking, there should be an association. This paper examines whether such a relationship exists, and, in so doing, aims to contribute to research on self-control and to efforts to understand the determinants of police and court decisions. We begin first by discussing self-control theory, link that work to work linking self-control to justice system decisionmaking, and then examine

data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to test whether low self-control increases the risk of arrest and, separately, whether, controlling for the decision to arrest, it predicts conviction. The implications of the study's findings then are discussed.

## **SELF-CONTROL THEORY**

In the original articulation of their theory, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that an individual's level of self-control is the outcome of parental socialization occurring during the first ten years of life. Parents who responsibly monitor their child's behavior, recognize their child's inappropriate or deviant behavior, and appropriately sanction, punish, or correct their child's behavior are likely to instill or inculcate self-control. Parents who are unable or unwilling to fully invest and participate in the responsibilities inherent to parenting fail to instill self-control. Because the effects of early-life parental socialization are so profound, an individual's level of self-control is theorized to be relatively stable and endure over the life-course.

Persons with low self-control demonstrate a constellation of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. They tend to (1) have a here-and-now orientation whereby they seek immediate as opposed to delayed gratification; (2) prefer easy and simple tasks and dislike activities that require diligence, tenacity, and persistence; (3) engage in behaviors that are risky and exciting rather than cautious and cognitive; (4) fail to see the longer-term benefits of investing in social institutions; (5) are attracted to endeavors that entail little skill or planning; and (6) are unkind, insensitive, hot-tempered, self-centered, and unsympathetic to others. Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994, p. 261) have noted further that "evidence has accumulated that people who tend to lie,

cheat, and steal also tend to hit other people; that the same people tend to drink, smoke, use drugs, wreck cars, desert their spouses, quit their jobs, and come late to class.”

Researchers have shown that a cascade of maladaptive, imprudent, antisocial, and criminal behaviors result from low self-control. Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, and Benson (1997, pp. 490-491) found that self-control was related in the expected direction to “quality of family relationships, attachment to church, having criminal associates and values, educational attainment and occupational status, and residing in a neighborhood perceived to be disorderly. Self-control is also significantly related to quality of friendships and the analogous behavior measure is negatively related to marriage and positively related to nights out.” Gibson, Wright, and Tibbetts (2000) found that low self-control was related to multiple dimensions of school failure, poor family relations, limited career goals, associating with delinquent peers, and delinquent behavior. Low self-control has also been shown to significantly predict violent victimization (Stewart, Elifson, & Sterk, 2004) and membership in risky antisocial groups (Schreck, Stewart, & Fisher, 2006).

Vazsonyi, Pickering, Junger, and Hessing (2001) conducted a large-scale (n= 8,417) examination of self-control theory using representative samples of youth from the Netherlands, Hungary, Sweden, and the United States and produced several findings that were concordant with the theory. For example, low self-control was correlated with deviant behavior for males, females, and five different age groups of adolescents from the four nations. Moreover, the effects of self-control appeared to be invariant across national and cultural contexts. Winfree, Taylor, He, and Esbensen (2006) conducted a 5-year-longitudinal study of self-control theory based on data from 965 youths sampled from six cities, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska, Lac Cruces, New Mexico, Portland, Oregon, and Phoenix, Arizona. They found clear

differences in self-control, impulsivity, and risk taking by offender status. Offenders always demonstrated less self-control, more impulsivity, and greater risk taking than non-offenders and the slopes of the group differences were relatively unchanging (see also Arneklev, Cochran, & Gainey, 1998; Beaver & Wright, 2007; Turner & Piquero, 2002).

In another assessment of self-control research, Pratt and Cullen (2000) reviewed 21 studies that included 17 independent data sets and 49,727 individual cases. They examined the effect-size estimates of 126 self-control measures to crime-related dependent variables and found a consistent effect size that exceeded .20. They suggested that studies which fail to include measures of self-control risk being misspecified. Gottfredson (2006) offered much the same assessment, noting, “If theories may be judged by their consistency with the facts, control theory is doing exceptionally well” (p. 96). In short, and separate from Gottfredson’s (2006) assessment, self-control theory clearly enjoys a considerable level of support for its main proposition that low-self control contributes to offending.

## **LOW SELF-CONTROL AND POLICE AND COURT OUTCOMES**

Many theories of crime point to causal factors that may increase crime, but they do not necessarily identify factors that may lead to differential criminal justice system responses (e.g., arrest, conviction, and sentencing). Self-control theory is one notable exception. As noted at the outset, the very characteristics held to flow from, or embody, low self-control—including hot-headedness, impulsivity, and insensitivity—are the very types that might influence criminal justice processing decisions (e.g., arrest, conviction) by influence law enforcement officer and court personnel perceptions of demeanor (Klinger, 1994; Mears, 1998; Mastrofski, Reisig, &



McCluskey, 2002). The salience of demeanor—including such dimensions as appearance, attitude, and body language—stems from the fact that research has consistently found it to influence police and court decisions (see, generally, Hagan, 1975; Miller et al., 2007). In this regard, consider Piliavin and Briar's (1964) now classic policing study, which concluded:

The cues used by police to assess demeanor were fairly simple. Juveniles who were contrite about their infractions, respectful to officers, and fearful of the sanction that might be employed against them tended to be viewed by patrolmen as basically law-abiding or at least 'salvageable...' [I]n contrast, youthful offenders who were fractious, obdurate, or who appeared nonchalant in their encounters with patrolmen were likely to be viewed as 'would-be tough guys' or 'punks' who fully deserved the most severe sanction: arrest. (Pp. 210-211)

Although Piliavin and Briar were not testing self-control theory, there are clear linkages between the interpersonal profile and demeanor of an offender with low self-control and the arrestee demeanor described in their study. Research since then reinforces the idea that the characteristics of low self-control individuals translate into behaviors that may influence police and court decisionmaking. For example, in a recent study, Piquero, Gomez-Smith, and Langton (2004) found that individuals low in self-control were more likely to perceive sanctions as being unfair and in turn to be angry. As the authors allude, such hostility likely translates into differential treatment by the police (p. 725; see also Wilson, 1968, p. 36).

The most obvious parallel is to that of studies of mental illness and the criminal justice system. Evidence consistently reveals that there is overrepresentation of the mentally ill in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, but the critical question has been whether the overrepresentation results from a greater propensity to offend or a greater likelihood to be

arrested or convicted. With respect to the latter explanation, Hirschfield et al. (2006, pp. 597-598) have noted, for example, that “mental health problems may elevate the risk of arrest by increasing the odds of offense detection, calls to the police, and police decisions to arrest.” To illustrate, some mentally ill, such as those who are severely depressed, may draw attention to themselves as a “cry for help,” leading to increased detection of them by school officials; and, when called on by schools and families, or when patrolling, the police may construe some behaviors of the mentally as erratic and thus threatening (p. 598).

Much the same may hold true for individuals with low self-control—that is, regardless of whether low self-control increases offending, it may contribute to self-presentation and demeanor in such a way as to call attention to individuals with low self-control. It also may signify a lack of responsibility, acceptance of responsibility for one’s behavior, and amenability to treatment, all of which are dimensions considered central to juvenile and criminal justice system processing, especially the processing of young offenders (Feld, 1999; Leiber & Mack, 2003; Kupchik, 2006). Speaking to this idea is an important study by Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey (2002), which used observational data of 3,130 citizen-police encounters in two cities to study how suspect behavior, suspect characteristics, and location affected the use of police disrespect. The authors found that persons with low self-control were significantly likely to experience disrespect at the hands of the police. Indeed, other than citizen-initiated disrespect toward the police, low self-control was the strongest predictor of experiencing disrespect and its effect size was *two to three times* greater than effect sizes of common correlates of crime such as age, sex, and income.

Despite the generality of self-control theory, the research community has been considerably slower to evaluate the relationships between self-control and encounters with the

criminal justice system (DeLisi & Berg, 2006). A few exceptions exist, however. In a seminal study, Longshore, Turner, and Stein (1996) examined self-control theory using 580 offenders involved in the Treatment Alternatives to Street Crime (TASC) program and found that self-control was predictive of both crimes of force and fraud; and that offenders with lower self-control committed more crimes. Their work is noteworthy in that it was the first investigation of self-control theory using a sample of persons with extensive criminal histories. Subsequent research with the same data source provided additional support for self-control theory vis-à-vis the role of criminal opportunity (Longshore, 1998; Longshore & Turner, 1998).

DeLisi (2001a, 2001b) used a probability sample of 500 adult arrestees to explore the applicability of self-control theory among known offenders who *a priori* would have very low levels of self-control. Offenders with low self-control were significantly likely to accumulate arrests for varied types of criminal behavior, including violent, property, white-collar, and nuisance offending. Further, low self-control was related to various criminal justice outcomes and behaviors, such as missing court appearances, violating probation and parole sentences, escaping from custody, and being sentenced to prison. Low self-control has also proven to be a significant facilitator of recidivism. Benda (2003) conducted a five-year follow-up of 601 adult male graduates of a boot camp and found that self-control was the strongest predictor of recidivism among offenders whose criminal careers started before and after age ten. For both onset groups, the effects of self-control exceeded those of many acknowledged correlates of crime, including delinquent peer associations, family attachments, abuse history, frustration and general strain, gang involvement, weapons violations, and drug history. De Li (2005) linked low self-control to drug problems among a diverse sample of 620 jail inmates in Philadelphia.

Moreover, the effects of self-control on drug abuse operated similarly for White, Black, and Hispanic inmates.

Self-control also appears to relate to outcomes at the extremes of crime. For example, Piquero, MacDonald, Dobrin, Daigle, and Cullen (2005) established an empirical link between low self-control, serious/violent criminal offending, and homicide victimization using a sample of nearly 4,000 parolees from the California Youth Authority. Among the parolee population, those with very low levels of self-control were about 170 percent more likely than offenders with greater self-control to be murdered. Also using data from the California Youth Authority, Langton (2006) found that low self-control predicted parole failure. Recently, DeLisi, Hochstetler, Higgins, Beaver, and Graeve (2008) explored the relationships between self-control and seven correctional outcomes. Net of the effects of twenty controls for criminal career, demographic, social background and risk factors, and various correctional risk measures, attitudinal or behavioral measures of self-control were associated with negative social interactions with prison staff, correctional substance abuse, physical assaults against correctional staff, weapon carrying, placement in a disciplinary unit, infraction history, and retaliation against other inmates.

In short, research to date suggests some support for the hypothesis that low self-control essentially serves not only to increase offending but that it also serves as an extra-legal factor that influences how law enforcement and court personnel perceive individuals and, more specifically, their arrest and conviction decisions. However, the research thus far has suffered from several significant limitations. The DeLisi et al. (2008) study, for example, relied on fewer than 200 cases and focused on just one state. More importantly, prior work has focused solely on criminal justice system populations, thus raising questions about whether the estimated effects

are generalizable. Low self-control individuals who have been arrested may not, for example, be representative of low self-control individuals in general. In turn, it remains largely unknown whether low self-control, among the general population, is associated with law enforcement decisionmaking and, in turn, court decisions.

## **CURRENT FOCUS**

In this study, we test the hypothesis that low self-control is a significant, positive predictor of entrée into the criminal justice system. The main goal of the study is to build on the small but growing literature that has explored the relationships between offender self-control and assorted criminal justice outcomes. We do so by providing what we believe is the first empirical test of the self-control and criminal justice system response hypothesis using a nationally representative sample that includes measures of self-control, self-reported offending of court-involved and non-court-involved youth, and justice system decisionmaking.

## **METHODS**

### **Data**

Data for this study come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Udry, 2003). The Add Health is a three-wave, nationally-representative sample of American youths attending seventh through twelfth grade during the 1994-1995 academic school year. Respondents were selected for inclusion in the sample through the use of a school-based

sampling design, where high schools were the original sampling unit. Using stratified sampling techniques, a total of eighty high schools and fifty-two middle schools participated in the study. On a specified school day, all students in attendance at these schools completed a self-report survey that asked questions about their demographics, their behaviors, their home life, and their social relationships. More than 90,000 adolescents completed the wave 1 in-school questionnaire. To gain more detailed information, a subsample of respondents was selected to be re-interviewed, along with their primary caregivers, at their home. The wave 1 in-home survey instruments included questions about the adolescent's delinquent activities, their sexual behaviors, their social relationships, and their family members, among others. In total, 20,745 adolescents and 17,700 of their primary caregivers took part in the wave 1 in-home component of the study (Harris et al., 2003).

Approximately one to one-and-a-half years after the wave 1 in-home surveys were administered the wave 2 interviews took place. Since most of the respondents were still adolescents, the items included on the questionnaires were still age-appropriate. As a result, the wave 1 and wave 2 survey instruments were very similar and included many of the same items. For example, respondents were still asked about their delinquent behaviors, their sexual conduct, and their social and family relationships. Overall, 14,738 respondents were re-interviewed at wave 2. The third wave of data was collected during 2001-2002, when most of the respondents were young adults. The questionnaires at wave 3 were redesigned to include items that tapped the respondent's lifetime contact with the criminal justice system, their childbearing history, and their marital status, along with other questions relevant to young adults. Wave 3 surveys were completed by 15,197 respondents (Harris et al., 2003). Only male respondents were analyzed for the current study because the base rates of offending for females were extremely low. With this

selection criterion in place, and after removing cases with missing values, the statistical models were based on sample sizes that ranged from  $N = 8,094$  to  $N = 1,052$ .

## MEASURES

### Contact with the Criminal Justice System

*Number of police contacts.* During wave 3 interviews, each respondent was asked to indicate the total number of times they had contact with the police for some reason other than a minor traffic violation. Responses were coded continuously, where the value represents the number of times the respondent had contact with the police. As shown in Table 1, the average number of police contacts is 2.23. This measure pools together all different reasons for the police contact and it does not tap the outcome of the police contact (e.g., arrest). Still, it provides a benchmark measure of the amount of contact each respondent had with the police.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1 about Here\*\*\*

*Age of first police contact.* Respondents who indicated they had at least one contact with the police were then asked a series of follow-up questions. One of these questions pertained to the age at which they first had been stopped by the police. Responses were originally coded continuously, but following prior research that suggests that age 14 is a critical threshold for habitual criminal behavior (DeLisi, 2006), this item was dichotomized where 0 = age of first police contact occurred after age 14 and 1 = age of first police contact occurred at age 14 or

below. Table 1 shows that nearly 15 percent of the sample had their first police contact at the age 14 or below.

*Number of arrests.* During wave 3 interviews, each respondent was asked to indicate the total number of times they had been arrested for a crime before age 18. Responses were coded continuously, where the value indicated the number of arrests. Table 1 indicates that the average number of arrests for males in the Add Health sample was 1.20.

*Arrested for a violent crime.* Specific information was also gathered about the offense for which the respondent was arrested. Two of the offenses—robbery and assault—were identified as serious violent crimes. As a result, we constructed a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent was arrested for a violent crime (0 = arrested for a nonviolent crime, 1 = arrested for a violent crime).

*Age of first arrest.* Respondents who indicated they had been arrested for a crime were then asked to indicate the age of their first arrest. Responses were then dichotomized to indicate whether they had been arrested after age 14 (coded with a “0”) or at or below age 14 (coded with a “1”). Table 1 indicates that approximately 10 percent of males had been arrested before age 14.

*Ever convicted of a crime.* Respondents who had been arrested for a crime were then asked to indicate whether they were subsequently convicted of the crime. This item was dichotomized, where 0 = not convicted, 1 = convicted.

## **Low Self-Control**

*Low self-control.* There has been a considerable amount of debate over the most reliable and valid way to measure individual variation in levels of self-control (DeLisi, Hochstetler, &



Murphy, 2003; Longshore, 1998; Longshore, Turner, & Stein, 1996; Marcus, 2004; Piquero & Rosay, 1998). The most widely used self-control scale is the one developed by Grasmick et al. (1993). The Grasmick et al. scale, however, was not available in the Add Health data and thus we were forced to use a different scale to measure self-control. There are at least two reasons to believe that using a different scale will not bias the results. First, the meta-analysis conducted by Pratt and Cullen (2000) revealed that the association between low self-control and delinquency outcomes was observed across measurement strategies. That is, other scales besides the Grasmick et al. (1993) scale provided similar effects. Second, recently there has been some research revealing that the Grasmick et al. scale is not as valid and reliable as once thought (DeLisi et al., 2003; Higgins, 2007; Marcus, 2004).

Against this backdrop, we developed a 23-item multi-rater self-control scale that was based on parent and self-report responses. A number of steps were taken to ensure that the 24-items were measuring self-control. First, the twenty-four items were factor analyzed and the results revealed that all of the items loaded on a unitary factor. Second, internal reliability assessments indicated that removing any of the items would reduce Cronbach's alpha. Third, confirmatory factor analysis suggested that all of the items were measuring one latent construct. The items in this scale measured the respondent's temper, their ability to keep their mind focused, their attention level, and their self-centeredness, among others ( $\alpha = .74$ ). All of the items included in the scale are presented in Appendix A.

## **Demographics**

*Age.* To help control for the age-graded nature of delinquent and criminal involvement (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Sampson & Laub, 1993), and because the age range for our study sample spanned the years (ages 12-21) in which the age curve is most pronounced, age was included as a statistical control variable. During wave 1 interviews, each respondent was asked to indicate their age. As a result, age was included as a continuous variables measured in years.

*Race.* Given that contact with the criminal justice system varies drastically between whites and nonwhites (Tracy, 2002), we included race as a statistical control variable. Respondents were asked to self-report their race, and the measure used in the current analysis was dichotomized such that 0 = white, 1 = nonwhite.

## **PLAN OF ANALYSIS**

The analysis for this paper proceeded in a series of linked steps. First, we examined the effect that low self-control had on the four contact-with-criminal-justice-system measures. Negative binomial regression models were estimated for the models using the number of police contacts measure and the number of arrests measure as dependent variables because these two measures were severely skewed. Binary logistic regression models were calculated for the models using the age first stopped by police variable and for the age first arrested variable. Second, we confined the analysis to only those males who had been stopped by the police and we estimated whether low self-control was associated with the decision to arrest. In other words, these models estimated whether low self-control predicted whether the respondent was arrested after they had been stopped by the police. To do so, the number of arrests variable was dichotomized such that 0 = never arrested, 1 = arrested at least once. Third, we confined the

analysis to males who had been arrested and estimated whether low self-control predicted whether they were convicted of a crime.

## RESULTS

The analysis began by predicting contact with the criminal justice system with the low self-control scale. In the first model of Table 2, the number of police contacts scale is used as the dependent variable in a negative binomial regression equation. As can be seen, low self-control exerted a statistically significant and positive effect on number of police contacts ( $b=.03, p<.05$ ). In other words, respondents who had lower levels of self-control reported more contact with the police. Similar results emerged in the second model where number of arrests was used as the dependent variable. Consistent with the general theory, the low self-control scale exerted a positive and statistically significant effect on number of arrests ( $b=.08, p<.05$ ). The last two columns in Table 2 estimated the effect of low self-control on age of first police contact and age of first arrest. Once again, low self-control surfaced as a statistically significant predictor of both of these measures (age of first police contact  $b=.06, p<.05$ ; age of first arrest  $b=.09, p<.05$ ).

\*\*\*Table 2 about here\*\*\*

The models contained in Table 3 estimated the effect of low self-control and arrest status (0 = not arrested, 1 = arrested) among the sample of males who had been stopped by the police. The first model reveals that lower levels of self-control correspond to a greater chance of being arrested ( $b=.04, p<.05$ ). This effect was observed even after controlling for early age of first

police contact (model 2) and total number of police contacts (model 3). The fact that self-control remains significant even when these two measures are included is notable because they constitute relatively strong controls for prior offending, relevant here because increased offending could result in a greater prior record, which in turn might be the underlying factor influencing decisions to arrest. Clearly, however, self-control appears to influence law enforcement decisionmaking, net of prior experience with the criminal justice system.

\*\*\*Table 3 about here\*\*\*

Table 4 displays the results of the logit models predicting conviction status (0 = not convicted, 1 = convicted) among the sample of males who had been arrested. Consistent with the previous models, low self-control increased the odds of a conviction, as shown in Model 1 ( $b=.05$ ,  $p<.05$ ). It is possible that low self-control is associated with greater odds of being convicted because persons with low self-control are probably more apt to accrue a lengthy criminal record and they may be more likely to engage in acts of serious violence, both of which would increase the odds of a conviction. To address this possibility, models 2 and 3 show the effect of low self-control on conviction status controlling for early age of first arrest and whether the respondent was arrested for a violent crime, respectively. In both models, low self-control continued to have an independent and statistically significant effect on the odds of being convicted ( $b=.04$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

\*\*\*Table 4 about here\*\*\*

Finally, to explore in greater detail the effects of low self-control on arrest and conviction, Figure 1 portrays the predicted probabilities of these two outcomes. As can be seen, respondents with relatively low levels of self-control had much higher probabilities of being arrested and convicted when compared to respondents with relatively high levels of self-control. To put this into perspective, consider that the predicted probability of being arrested for a respondent with a score of 28 on the low self-control scale was .3864, while the predicted probability of being arrested for a respondent with a score of 78 on the low self-control scale was .8193. Similarly, the predicted probability of being convicted for a respondent with a score of 28 on the low self-control scale was .0612, while the predicted probability of being convicted for a respondent with a score of 78 on the low self-control scale was .4210. Clearly, the decision to arrest and convict is partially influenced by levels of self-control.

\*\*\*Figure 1 about here\*\*\*

## CONCLUSION

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1999) self-control theory is among the most studied topics in criminology, researchers have only recently begun to explore the salience of offender self-control as it relates to criminal justice system involvement and decisionmaking. Unfortunately, prior research has utilized small or geographically limited samples (e.g., Benda, 2003, DeLi, 2005; DeLisi et al. 2008; Longshore et al., 1996; Piquero et al. 2005). To redress this situation and to contribute to scholarship on law enforcement and criminal court decisionmaking, the current study explored the relationship between self-control and criminal

justice system contacts in a nationally representative sample of males. In testing the hypothesis that low self-control predicts a greater likelihood of arrest and conviction, three major findings emerged. First, low self-control was consistently related to criminal justice system involvement as measured by police contacts, arrests, age at first police contact, and arrest onset. Males with lower self-control accumulate more police contacts and arrests in addition to having an earlier onset of police contacts and arrests. For all four models, the effects of low self-control exceeded the effects for age. Second, the effects of low self-control on arrest withstood controls for early police contacts and total number of police contacts. That is to say that low self-control was not simply a proxy for offenses seriousness or prior record; its effects on arrest and conviction were net of any effect that it had on criminal involvement. Third, the effects of low self-control on conviction remained significant with controls for arrest onset and arrest for a violent crime.

The results suggest that, among offenders who come into contact with the criminal justice system, those with lower levels of self-control are at greater risk of being arrested and convicted. In short, there is a self-control penalty that results in a greater likelihood of formal processing and sanctioning. In keeping with studies of how demeanor influences police and court decisionmaking (Miller et al., 2007) and those that investigate why the mentally ill are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Hirschfield et al., 2006), we argued that such a penalty may result from differences in how low self-control individuals behave and, in turn, are perceived. Acting differently, defiantly, impulsively, or being more likely to be disrespectful—these are among the attributes associated with low self-control that may be construed by law enforcement and the courts as meriting a tougher response. Should this interpretation be correct, it highlights an important extra-legal factor influencing law enforcement and sentencing decisions, and is one that has gone largely unexamined in research to date. One exception is the

recent study by Piquero et al. (2004), which found that persons with low self-control were significantly more likely to perceive legal sanctions as unfair and their subsequent treatment as unjust compared to persons with higher self-control. Moreover, persons with low self-control were significantly likely to respond angrily to their perceived legal persecution. Such findings suggest that, as a global construct, low self-control portends negative, and at times, extremely negative, outcomes between citizens and the police. It also highlights the importance of exploring a broader range of extra-legal sentencing factors—beyond those of age, sex, and race—than studies typically examine (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Hagan, 1975; Klinger, 1994; Mears, 1998; Mastrofski et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2007).

Despite the strengths of the current study, the findings need to be interpreted with caution in light of a number of limitations. First, and perhaps most importantly, the Add Health data did not include any information about the actual demeanor of the respondent. That necessarily means that we were unable to explore whether in fact self-control influenced demeanor and, in turn, the decision to arrest and convict. We argued that low self-control may likely lead to defiance or other negative actions that elicit punitive responses from law enforcement agents (Sherman, 1993), but it may be that low self-control and high self-control individuals do not differ appreciably in their demeanor when confronted by the police or when in court. Future research needs to explore these possibilities in greater detail. Second, the Add Health data did not include any details surrounding the circumstances of the police stop. As a result, it was not possible to examine whether the effect of low self-control was moderated by the presence of eyewitnesses, by the victims requests, or by any other factor (see, generally, Miller et al., 2007; Piquero et al., 2004). Third, all of the items included in the analyses were based on self-reports, which

necessarily raises questions about the reliability and validity of the responses (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981).

With these limitations in mind, additional research examining the effects of self-control on criminal justice decisionmaking is needed. One important line of inquiry, apart from determining whether the identified effect emerges in other studies, is to examine the mediating effects of self-control on criminal justice decisionmaking. For example, measures of actual demeanor of those who come into contact with the criminal justice system, or of those who are arrested, could be examined to test whether self-control effects arise by influencing individual offenders' demeanors. In addition, future researchers should examine whether self-control has ripple effects during interactions with criminal justice personnel across various stages of the criminal justice system. For instance, Baron, Forde, and Kay's (2007) study of homeless male street youths indicated that the temper dimension of self-control was predictive of violent offending along with situational factors relating to street conflicts. In other words, youths with low self-control were doubly disadvantaged because their hot tempers not only elicited confrontation from others but also resulted in the use of force once the confrontation occurred. In the same way, offenders with hair-trigger tempers might be the type of individuals who experience rancorous interactions with police, jail deputies, pretrial service staff, attorneys, judges, probation officers, and the like, and which accumulates into increasingly greater probabilities of formal and tougher sanctioning.

In addition, and similar to what Bridges and Steen (1998) did in their study of probation officer assessments of juvenile offenders, future studies would do well to incorporate information from multiple sources—including both offenders and criminal justice system actors—about specific events to assess the extent to which certain behaviors contribute to justice



system perceptions and decisions. Finally, it may well be that self-control interacts with other factors to influence criminal justice system actors' decisions. A focal concerns perspective (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998), for example, would anticipate that, young, male, minority offenders with low self-control might experience markedly higher levels of formal processing, a possibility that could be explored with data sets that include a wider age range of offenders.

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## **Appendix A. Items in the Low Self-Control Scale**

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1. All things considered, how is your child's life going?\*
2. You get along well with your child.\*
3. You can trust your child.\*
4. Does your child have a bad temper?\*
5. You never argue with anyone.
6. When you get what you want, it's usually because you worked hard for it.
7. You never get sad.
8. You never criticize other people.
9. You usually go out of your way to avoid having to deal with problems in your life.
10. Difficult problems make you very upset.
11. When making decisions, you usually go with your "gut feeling" without thinking too much about the consequences of each alternative.
12. When you have a problem to solve, one of the first things you do is get as many facts about the problem as possible.
13. When attempting to find a solution to a problem, you usually try to think of as many different ways to approach the problem as possible.
14. When making decisions, you generally use a systematic method for judging and comparing alternatives.
15. After carrying out a solution to a problem, you usually try to analyze what went right and what went wrong.
16. You like yourself just the way you are.
17. You feel like you are doing everything just about right.
18. You feel socially accepted.
19. Do you have trouble getting along with your teachers?
20. Do you have trouble paying attention in school?
21. Do you have trouble keeping your mind focused?
22. Do you have trouble getting your homework done?
23. Do you have trouble getting along with other students?

\*Indicates a question asked to the parent. All other questions were asked directly to the respondent.



**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Selected Add Health Sample Variables**

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	Mean	SD	Min. – Max.
# of police contacts	2.23	1.30	0 – 9
Age of first police contact	.15	.35	0 – 1
# of arrests	1.20	3.16	0 – 30
Ever arrested	.19	.39	0 – 1
Arrested for a violent crime	.02	.14	0 – 1
Age of first arrest	.10	.30	0 – 1
Ever convicted	.04	.19	0 – 1
Low self-control	47.96	7.96	20 – 84
Age	16.12	1.72	12 – 21
Race	.35	.48	0 – 1

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**Table 2. Low Self-Control and Contact with the Criminal Justice System in a Nationally Representative Sample of Males**

	# of Police Contacts			# of Arrests			Age of First Police Contact			Age of First Arrest		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>
Low self-control	.03*	.00	1.03	.08*	.01	1.08	.06*	.01	1.06	.09*	.01	1.09
Age	-.08*	.02	0.93	-.20*	.04	0.82	-.23*	.04	0.80	-.24*	.06	0.79
Race	.24*	.06	1.27	.36*	.14	1.43	-.08	.16	0.92	.09	.23	1.10
R-squared	.01			.03			.01			.01		
<i>N</i>	5,776			5,768			8,041			8,094		

\**p*<.01

**Table 3. The Relationship between Low Self-Control and the Decision to Arrest in a Sample of Males Stopped by the Police (Logit Models)**

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>
Low self-control	.04*	.01	1.04	.04*	.01	1.04	.04*	.01	1.04
Age	.10*	.03	1.02	.11*	.03	1.11	.10*	.03	1.11
Race	-.04	.11	0.96	-.03	.11	0.97	-.09	.11	0.92
Early age of first police contact				.65*	.18	1.92			
Total number of police contacts							.18*	.04	1.20
R-squared		.03			.04			.04	
<i>N</i>		1,742			1,710			1,742	

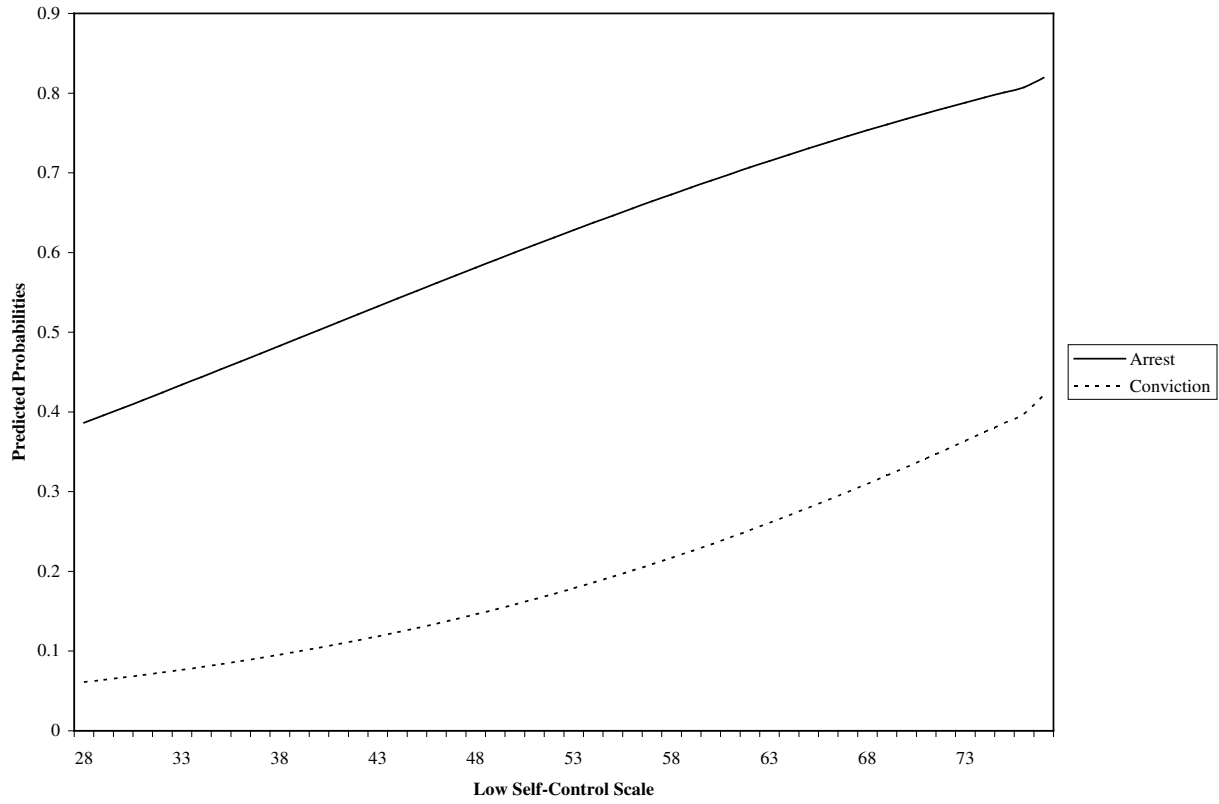
\* $p < .01$

**Table 4. The Relationship between Low Self-Control and Conviction Status in a Sample of Male Arrestees (Logit Models)**

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(b)</i>
Low self-control	.05*	.01	1.05	.04*	.01	1.04	.04*	.01	1.05
Age	-.24*	.05	0.79	-.23*	.05	0.80	-.22*	.05	0.80
Race	.38*	.17	1.46	.32	.18	1.37	.22	.18	1.25
Early age of first arrest				1.71*	.24	5.52			
Arrested for a violent crime							2.14*	.23	8.48
R-squared		.05			.09			.12	
<i>N</i>		1,061			1,052			1,056	

\* $p < .05$

**Figure 1. The Predicted Probabilities of Arrest and Conviction by Levels of Self-Control**



Note: Predicted values were calculated with age and race set at their mean