

**Examining Religion as A Preventative Factor
to Delinquency**

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Executive Summary

Throughout the past, clergymen, church members, and social scientists, have assumed that religious beliefs and church attendance are effective deterrent to delinquent behavior. Many hypothesized that the more religious a person was, the less likely he or she will be to participate in delinquent behavior. As time and technology progressed researchers began looking more empirically at the connection between religion and delinquency. Unfortunately, science has neither confirmed nor refuted the age old hypothesis that religion deters delinquency. “During the 1970's and 1980's several studies using more sophisticated methodologies and statistical analysis produced mixed results.” (Chadwick, and Top, 1993) These mixed results allow church officials, legislators, and social workers to pick and choose research that supports their particular view. However, an overall analysis reveals that no theory can account for all the research. As Tittle and Welch (1983) point out, religiosity¹ cannot in and of itself be conclusively held as a deterrent for delinquency.

Despite numerous theoretical reasons for expecting religion to contribute to social conformity, social scientists cannot say with any confidence whether religiosity actually inhibits deviant behavior. Over forty years of research has produced results which are often interpreted as inconclusive or even contradictory.

A large amount of the inconsistency between various studies in the ways in which researchers have operationalized religiosity and delinquency. Many studies choose to define religiosity simply as church attendance. This provides an easy way to quantify religiosity, and

¹Religiosity is a term researchers use to quantify an individual's commitment to any particular religion. Although the terms “religion”, “religiousness”, and “religiosity” are often used interchangeably, many researchers prefer “religiosity” because it denotes a specific measure of individual commitment (like “velocity” as a scientific measure in physics) rather than simply common belief held by a number of people.

therefore is easy to analyze statistically. In addition, many studies show that church attendance is declining, which concerns those who believe in religion as an important component of crime prevention. However, this measure of delinquency is confounded by a number of factors including forced attendance at church, attendance based on sentimental rather than commitment, component skewing research.

Other attempts to define religion attempt to include morals and values, cultural context, and individual determining factors. Defining delinquency is often just as difficult. Researchers must decide whether deviant behavior must be misdemeanors and felonies, drug use, etc. Because of differing definitions, studies report differing results. Consequently, social science has yet to make a definitive statement regarding the connection between religion and delinquency.

Penitentiaries of the Past

Throughout history, the line separating crime and sin has been blurry at best, and in most cases non-existent. During the eighteenth century, many thought deviant behavior was caused by evil spirits, supernatural powers, or the result of individual free choice. (Schafer and Knudten, 1970) In 1790, Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail was converted into a penitentiary, where penance was adopted as the new ideology. Penance is defined as, "The act of *self* punishment as reparation for guilt, *sins*, etc." (Abate, 1998, emphasis added) Institutions were initially named penitentiaries because the question of crime with sin necessitated a means of reformation for "unclean" offenses. The first "penitentiaries" were founded on the religious philosophy that the offenders should make amends with society and accept responsibility for their own misdeeds. In the eighteenth century prisons, "Penance was the primary vehicle through which rehabilitation was anticipated, and the study of the Bible was strongly encouraged." (Schmallegger, 1997) Capital punishment, often conducted in public, made offenders examples in order to discourage crime. The death sentence was used as a consequence all manners of crimes including, "murder and arson, horse stealing, and children's disrespect for their parents." (Rothman, 1971, pg15)

The late eighteenth century marked a paradigm shift from corporal punishment towards imprisonment with the hope of conforming the will of the individual. Early prison systems used solitary confinement and congregate silent systems in an attempt to compel offenders to reflect on the damage they had caused to others and society. Eighteenth century lawmakers aspired to establish penitentiaries, "free of corruptions and dedicated to the proper training of the inmate,

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[penitentiaries] would inculcate the discipline the negligent parents, evil companions, taverns, houses of prostitution, theaters, and gambling halls had destroyed.” (Rothman 1971, pg 82) In many ways, this type of religiously driven penal goal starkly contrasts our modern system. The United States no longer believes in public executions, and has detached the taut correlation of religion and delinquency from that of the past,

Contemporary society often claims sciences such as psychology, sociology, and criminology as empirical solutions to religiously driven penal systems; however, there is still much debate on how much of a bearing religion has on deviant behavior. “As observations on the influence of religion in the formation and volume of delinquency are scattered and inconclusive, the exact relationship between religion on one hand and delinquency and criminality on the other is unknown.” (Schafer & Knudten, 1970) Throughout the decades of research, various studies have conclusively shown conflicting results. This report² examines the effects of religion as a preventative factor in delinquency using the following parameters:

1. What is religiosity, and how has it been measured?
2. Why is there such a vast disparity in the correlation of religiousness and delinquent behavior?
3. Is religion directly correlated to delinquency, and to what extent?

²This paper was a literature search intended to examine the various studies and materials regarding the effects of religiosity on delinquency. It was not an experimental study, nor an empirical analysis drawing its own conclusions, but simply an overview of the studies already conducted.

Church Attendance: A Poor Measure of Religiosity

Religion is a multi-faceted word with many implications, which makes describing religion extremely difficult and often subjective. For some, being religious means simply attending church, for others it includes specific beliefs and practices such as prayer, rituals, and accepting certain values and morals. This ambiguity makes operationalizing religion difficult for researchers. As a result many narrowly define one's religiosity, or commitment to religion simply as church attendance. Hirschi and Stark (1969) illustrate why:

We shall not here be concerned with what religiosity really is. Instead we shall take for granted the view that religiosity is many things...The usual beginning point in studies of the effects of religion is a measure of church attendance. In our opinion this is as it should be.

Another reason researchers operationalize religiosity as church attendance is because data shows that youth are attending church less and less. Lawmakers and parents alike want to know to what extent relaxed attitudes toward church contribute to delinquency. Data collected by Bachman, Johnston & O'Malley (various years³) contributes to the idea that church attendance is declining among today's youth.

Researchers at the Institute for Social Research conducted a long-term study examining the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of young adults 19-32 in the United States (*see Figure 1*). They examined 420 public and private schools between 1976 and 1991. In 1976, approximately 40.7% of high school seniors attended church weekly. During 1991, the average attendance of

³Bachman, Johnson & O'Malley, working at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, conducted an ongoing cross-sectional study questioning youth extensively about various issues. The results were reported yearly in a work titled *Monitoring the Future*.

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high school seniors was 31.2%; indicated a 9.5% decline in religious attendance during a fifteen year period. The survey also depicts an increase in the population of high school seniors that consider religion “Not Important,” from 12.7% in 1976 to 15.3% in 1991.

Figure 1:

Religious involvement of high school seniors: 1976 to 1991

SOURCE: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Monitoring the Future, various years.

Religious activity and level of interest	Percent of Seniors					
	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1985
Frequency of attending religious services:						
Weekly.....	40.7	39.4	43.1	37.3	37.7	35.3
1-2 times a month.	16.3	17.2	16.3	17.4	16.2	16.6
Rarely.....	32.0	34.4	32.0	35.8	35.8	37.0
Never.....	11.0	9.0	8.6	9.6	10.2	11.1
Importance of religion in life:						
Very important....	28.8	27.8	32.4	28.4	29.7	27.3
Pretty Important..	30.5	33.0	32.6	33.0	32.6	32.4
A little.....	27.8	27.9	25.3	27.9	26.7	27.6
Not important.....	12.9	11.2	9.8	10.7	11.0	12.7
Religious activity and level of interest	Percent of Seniors					
	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Frequency of attending religious services:						
Weekly.....	34.4	31.8	31.9	31.4	30.4	31.2
1-2 times a month.	16.8	15.6	17.3	16.6	15.7	16.8
Rarely.....	36.9	39.6	39.0	38.5	39.7	37.6
Never.....	12.0	13.0	11.7	13.5	14.1	14.4
Importance of religion in life:						
Very important....	26.3	24.9	26.1	27.2	26.4	27.7
Pretty important..	32.7	31.7	31.9	30.3	29.5	30.0
A little.....	27.8	28.8	28.4	27.8	28.7	27.0
Not important.....	13.3	14.5	13.6	14.7	15.5	15.3

Although these figures indicate that church attendance and importance of religion may be

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on the decline among today's youth, analysis such as these have been criticized because of their superficial view of religiousness. Stark, Kant, and Doyle (1982) point out that:

Many people who attend church frequently who are not particularly religious in any other way—they do not believe in the theology of their church, they do not pray (except as part of the ritual of church services), nor do they think of themselves as concerned about religion. By the same token many persons who are very devout in other ways are infrequent churchgoers, and some such persons never attend at all. Thus, if one is interested in measuring inner religiousness, church attendance is not as good a measure as are direct inquiries about what a person believes and feels. Moreover, in the case of teenage boys, this measurement error is likely to be magnified because, compared to most adults, youth have less control over whether or not they go to church. It is this less accurate measurement provided by church attendance that produces the weaker correlations between church attendance and delinquency...

Stark et. al. points out that many teenagers and delinquents are coerced into going to church. This “forced religion” can skew research findings, and weaken the connection between religiosity and delinquency. Correlations may also be confounded by the “conscience factor,” which has an influence on deviants attending church. Delinquents consciences' may weigh them down, causing an increased frequency of church attendance for purification of the soul.

Yochelson and Samenow (1977) illustrate this phenomenon when describing “the criminal personality⁴:

Criminals of all ages have periods of self-doubt and may go to church themselves. This state of mind sometimes lasts no longer than the church service itself and is concurrent with criminality. Church-going serves as a palliative measure for the criminal's conscience.
(Yochelson, and Samenow, 1977)

⁴Yochelson and Samenow in their book The Criminal Personality describe various characteristics of criminality they believe are inherent to certain individuals. Because this criminality is a part of their personality, they propose, church attendance most likely does not motivate them to change - rather, it is simply one dimension of their personality.

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Even the non-criminal may attend church for reasons other than devotion. For example, some attend services simply out of tradition or sentiment, rather than commitment to ideals and values preached within the denomination. This too leads researchers to question using church attendance as a measure of true religiosity.

Religion still serves another function: it is of sentimental value to some. The criminal may cling to the religion of his childhood. Walking into a church, hearing the music, reading psalms, and participating in the ritual may evoke a strong nostalgia. This sentimentality may be a factor in frequent church attendance. (Yochelson, and Samenow, 1977)

Research conducted by Hirschi and Stark (1969) confirms the problem with using church attendance as a measure of religiousness. In an exhaustive survey involving 4,077 students of Western Contra Costa, California, Hirschi and Stark's well known study entitled "Hellfire and Delinquency" found no casual relationship between church attendance and delinquency.

In conclusion, although church attendance may be declining among today's youth, this decline does not clearly correlate to rates of delinquency. Therefore, church attendance along is an ineffective way to measure religiosity.

Moral Poverty and Ecological Theory

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In an attempt to better understand religion's contribution to preventing delinquency, researchers have attempted to focus studies more on the moral contributions of religious activity. When researchers use cultural, moral, and societal influences, to examine religiousness, the research reveals correlations between religion and delinquency more effectively. Since many of the moral ideals within a given society stem from religion, morals and values are crucial factors when observing religiosity. Morals can be defined as acceptable behaviors, that do not violate the norms of society; or right moral conduct. (Abate, 1998)

Sadly, many believe that the current "norms of society" are moving further and further away from true morality. The Advertising Council's Strategic Task Force observed, "Americans are convinced that today's youth face a crisis...not in their economic or physical well-being but in their values and morals." (Merkly Newman Harty, Public Agenda Foundation) Their observation was based on a sample of 2,000 randomly selected adults aged 18 years and older, and of 600 randomly selected youth between 12 and 17; both conducted in December 1996. The study contends that parents are fundamentally responsible for the aberrant condition of their youth, and that children are suffering because of the disinterest of the parents. According to their findings, most Americans view today's teenagers with trepidation, considering them undisciplined, disrespectful, and unfriendly. But is this really true? If so, what is the source of declining morality among today's youth?

Social scientists have long accepted poverty and low socio-economic status as contributing risk factors for delinquency; however, Sagi and Eisikovits (1981) propose a new risk factor: *moral* poverty. "Moral Poverty," as explained by Sagi and Eisikovits, is a deficiency

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of concerned adults capable of teaching their children right from wrong. This moral deprivation may be partly responsible for the increasing number of crimes committed by juveniles.

Presently, many youth are without parents and other authorities to habituate them to feel others joy and pain, or happiness when doing what is right, and remorse when doing what is wrong.

(DiIulio, 1997)

Religion plays a major role in dictating contemporary views of morality. Therefore, another factor contributing to moral poverty could be the continued attempts to divorce religion from society. In the name of tolerance, many accept what traditional religion would call immoral. Furthermore, in attempts to separate *church* and state, governments often end up separating *religion* from the state. If researchers can effectively correlate moral depravity and delinquency, a more religious community might be our most effective tool for eradicating moral poverty.

Results of studies including moral variables reveal new implications about the connection between morality and religion. During the early 1980's a new ideology was presented that shed a new light on why there were conflicting results with religion and delinquency surveys.

Parameters of religiosity have changed since the *Hellfire and Delinquency* (see pg 10 and annotated bibliography) test, and “As a consequence, virtually every published work subsequent to Hirschi and Stark’s has found evidence of a statistically significant, inverse, bivariate relationship [opposite] between some indicator of religiosity and various indicators of delinquent or deviant behavior.” (Cochran, Akers, 1989) However, most of this research hinges on the cultural context or “religious ecology” in which the study is conducted. As Chadwick and Top

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(1993) explain, “Religion is negatively associated with deviance only when it is part of widely accepted social values and norms prohibiting such behavior.” The study done by Chadwick and Top (1993) helped to settle some controversy concerning the ecological explanation used by researchers in the 1980's including Stark, Kant, and Doyle (1982) who observed,

...conflicting findings stem from variations in the religious ecology of the communities studied. In communities where religious commitment is the norm, the more religious an individual, the less likely he or she will be delinquent. However, in highly secularized communities, even the most devout teenagers are no less delinquent than the most irreligious.

Presently, many sociologists would agree that conflicting results from studies of the past (Hirschi and Stark) are from ecological conditions or the religious climate of the community studied.

The Provo Study⁵ tested the ecological theory and compared the youth of Provo to the area of Hirschi and Stark's. The data was based on a sample of boys from Provo, Utah. As cited, “Indeed, while Hirschi and Stark found that only 37 percent of white boys in Richmond attended church weekly, 55 percent of the boys in Provo attended at least that often, and 30 percent of them went to church at least three times a week.” (Stark, Kant, Doyle, 1982) Due to the different conclusions and sampling methods, other studies were conducted to bring about some clarification on the validity of the ecology theory. “The inconsistent support discovered for the religious ecology explanation justifies additional exploration of whether religion's

⁵When the Provo Study was administered, in 1972, the population of Provo was approximately 50,000 people; the overwhelming majority of which were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. At the time, Utah stood first among states in terms of church membership rates, and the Provo-Orem metropolitan area stood first among American cities with the rate of 966 per 1,000; compared to the 320 per 1,000 for the San Francisco-Oakland area, in which Richmond is located. (The area where Hirschi and Stark administered their survey) (Stark, Kant, Doyle, 1982)

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relationship to delinquency is a function of social cohesion or whether religious beliefs and values are related to such behaviors independent of the moral ecology.” (Chadwick, Top, 1993)

Other researchers expanded the ecological systems view when examining the religion-delinquency connection. Bainbridge⁶ (1989) suggested that old age, poverty levels, and education can all influence correlations in delinquency and religiosity. According to Bainbridge (1989), effective evaluation of religion and delinquency requires controlling for a wide variety of variables:

...divorce might be an interesting variable through which religion affects deviance... Other factors that influence rates of each kind of deviance must also be employed as controls, especially those that might be associated with religiousness. Suicide is stimulated by despair that sometimes accompanies old age, and many kinds of crime may be more common where substantial portions of the population experience economic and social frustrations.

The ecological theory gave researchers an effective alternative to using church attendance as their only method of operationalizing religiosity. As cited above, this led to important breakthroughs in examining religion and delinquency; however, this did not provide authoritative answers, nor did it settle controversy over the true correlation.

⁶William Sims Bainbridge is a professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at Illinois State University. He conducted a survey titled, “The Religious Ecology of Deviance.” His data was collected from the 75 American metropolitan areas outside New England. Delinquency was measured by suicide, crime, homosexuality, and cultism; religiosity was the rate of church membership. Their findings were that although many forms of crime and cultism are directly deterred by religion, the influence of religion upon suicide and homosexuality appears indirect, if it exists at all. (Bainbridge, 1989)

Is Religiosity Connected To Delinquency?

Although studies define religiosity and delinquency differently, creating contradictions and ambiguous conclusions, research does tend to support several generalizations. Correlations can be shown when religiosity is defined according to an individual's social, moral, and cultural context. For example, Chadwick and Top (1993) conclude:

Two measures of religiosity, private religious behavior and feelings of integration, also made significant contributions to predicting delinquency. The more frequent the private religious behavior and the stronger the feelings of being accepted in the local congregation the lower was the level of delinquency. (Chadwick, Top, 1993)

However, whenever correlations between religion and delinquency are examined, a certain degree of scientific skepticism must be reserved. Geographical locations, predominant areas of religion, family structure, socio-economic status, divorce, and poverty; all affect correlations. The methods of measuring religion, and delinquency respectively also largely determines the results of any study. Therefore, despite advances in theory and methodology, social science cannot conclude that overall religiosity is *directly* correlated with delinquency, not that any casual relationship exists. However, specific studies indicate that certain attributes of religion definitely have an impact of delinquency.

Religion deters some deviant acts, but not others. If religion lacks a particular community, it may have had an influence before and may still have an influence elsewhere. (Bainbridge, 1989)

Conclusion

For parents, lawmakers, and other community leaders, scientific results may not be conclusive, but they do make important implications. Religion should not be abandoned as a possible variable in the prevention of delinquency. Nor should inconclusive evidence further promote the separation of religion from the community. The place of religion in prevention of delinquency may not be clear, but it is there nonetheless.

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