

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

## Colvin, Mark: Coercion Theory

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Differential coercion theory (DCT) was developed by Mark Colvin in 2000 based on his earlier research on the penitentiary crisis in New Mexico Prison. He found coercive measures in prison settings to be highly problematic and conducive to noncompliant behavior. Employing the same logic in DCT, Colvin draws on several theories of criminality in an integrated format around the theme of *coercion*.

Mostly connected with the strain tradition of criminology, DCT takes coercion as a source of negative stimuli experienced during the socialization process that creates adverse social psychological states and, in turn, causes criminality. DCT integrates (1) criminological perspectives considering some social settings and social relations as crime-prone and some social settings as crime-resistant (social causation perspective) (2) with perspectives that see childhood characteristics (i.e., low self-control) as factors affecting the development of social relations as well as criminality (social selection perspective). In this regard, DCT sees chronic criminality as a product of individuals' exposure to erratic episodes of coercion in interpersonal and impersonal settings. The following sections examine DCT's conceptual framework and major premises, its empirical status, and its policy implications.

## Conceptual Framework

Coercion has been examined as a causal factor of crime and delinquency in several theories of criminology. Unfavorable family relations, including different forms of coercion (e.g., physical abuse, psychological pressures), for instance, are indicated to be the reason for delinquency at early ages. Early onset of criminality, in turn, increases the likelihood of engaging in delinquency during adolescence and in criminality during adulthood. In DCT, the term *coercion* refers to a power creating fear or anxiety that induces or threatens a person to do something. This power can exist in relations between individuals (interpersonal [p. 196 ↓] coercion) as well as in larger social contexts that are not directly related to individuals (impersonal coercion). While the latter version of coercion poses a macro-level effect on criminality, the former one is more of a micro-level factor affecting criminality. Coercion existing within the interpersonal relations can result from active or threatened use of force and several other physical or psychological intimidations between individuals. Coercion existing

in the larger social context, within which an individual lives, usually results from socioeconomic pressures (i.e., poverty, unemployment, income inequality, lack of educational opportunities). Coercion at both the interpersonal and impersonal levels can also be in the form of active or threatened removal of social support that an individual receives from several sources.

## Types of Coercion

DCT examines the relationship between coercion and criminality through a continuum of control ranging from coercive to non-coercive in different durations. According to this approach, control can range between coercive and non-coercive forms, and it can be applied on a consistent or an inconsistent (erratic) basis. When the extent of control and the amount of coercion involved is cross-tabulated, four different types of control emerge. For each type of control, different social-psychological and behavioral outcomes are predicted. Specifically, these different social-psychological states determine whether the individual subject to a respective type of control will display a complying or noncompliant (criminal) behavior. The four types of control are reviewed below.

### Type 1: Consistent, Non-Coercive

Consistently applied, non-coercive control helps individuals develop strong social bonds through strong elements of social support at both instrumental and expressive forms. Psychologically, consistently applied non-coercive control leads individuals to develop high self-control, high self-efficacy, and low anger. Through these social-psychological outcomes, individuals subject to Type 1 control develop an internal locus of control, and they are expected to display prosocial behavior with the least probability of criminality.

### Type 2: Erratic, Non-Coercive

Inconsistently applied non-coercive control is displayed in this type. Socially, Type 2 control does not develop a coercive control model, but it creates feelings of uncertainty

and unreliability of social bonds because social support and supervision are delivered on an inconsistent basis. This inconsistency of control psychologically causes low self-control, and such individuals take the risk of experimenting with antisocial behavior to maximize their pleasure and gain. As the result of these social-psychological outcomes, individuals subject to Type 2 control will be more likely to be involved in non-violent or victimless crimes.

## Type 3: Consistent, Coercive

People are subject to a consistent coercion in this type of control. This coercive control creates a disciplinary relationship between the sources of that control and the receiver of it. In this disciplinary type of relationship, only a limited amount of expressive and instrumental social support is provided. While individuals are punished for noncompliance, there is not much reward for complying behavior because it is default behavior in this disciplinary type of control. This type of control develops a weak and necessity-based social control found on avoiding disciplinary responses of the controller. People subject to Type 3 control are likely to develop psychopathological problems as a result of inward directed anger, helplessness, fear, and depression. Although those people are not very likely to be involved in chronic criminality, they can perpetrate violent random offenses, such as homicides or assaults, as a result of their psychopathology.

## Type 4: Erratic, Coercive

Control of behaviors is maintained through an inconsistent and coercive form of disciplining in Type 4. Reactions for noncompliance might be situated at the two edges of the continuum: It is either ignored or harshly punished. Furthermore, while a serious noncompliance can be ignored, a non-serious one can easily be reacted with a harsh punishment. The inconsistent nature of this punitive control does not allow for enough social support to develop a strong social bond. In contrast, [p. 197 ↓ ] an individual subject to that type of control develops a coercive social modeling for his or her own behavior. Furthermore, Type 4 control causes serious psychological deficits. This

inconsistency of coercive control, first of all, creates a control deficit on individuals; those people subject to that type of control have usually low self-control and low self-efficacy. Second, this inconsistent coercion causes an other-directed anger as a result of feelings of injustice. As a consequence, DCT predicts that people who are subject to this type of control are more likely to be involved persistently or chronically in predatory street crimes.

## Empirical Status

DCT has not yet to be tested extensively in different contexts. A 2004 study conducted by James Unnever, Colvin, and Francis Cullen, however, offered support for DCT. They employed both interpersonal (parental, peer) and impersonal (school, neighborhood) sources of coercion to test core assumptions of the theory. Using these sources of coercion, this study examined four types of possible social-psychological deficits that might result from coercion: coercive ideation, anger, parental social bonds, and school social bonds. The findings revealed that both impersonal and interpersonal coercion are positively related to delinquent involvement. More specifically, school coercion and neighborhood coercion were found to be strong predictors of delinquent involvement. This positive relation between delinquent involvement and different types of coercion could be direct or mediated by social-psychological deficits. The study demonstrates that social-psychological deficits mediate a significant portion of coercive forces' effects on delinquency. Among the four types of deficits—coercive ideation, anger, parental social bonds, and school social bonds—only anger was not significantly related to delinquency. The study, however, showed that anger is a result of coercive ideation and creates an effect on delinquency through coercive ideation.

## Policy Implications

Since DCT examines *coercion* at different levels as an important cause of crime, the most important policy outcome of the theory is to develop a comprehensive crime prevention program in which a non-coercive society and a non-coercive criminal justice

system are essential. In *Crime and Coercion*, Colvin provides the following policy proposals for a comprehensive crime prevention program:

- 1. *Short-term emergency measures*. To decrease the effects of coercion stemming from social context, joblessness should be diminished as much as possible through sustainable job training and job placement programs funded by the government.
- 2. *Nationwide parent effectiveness programs*. To develop a strong social bond to legitimate institutions and especially to the family, children should be disciplined in a consistently non-coercive fashion. To achieve this, parents should be trained to apply effective control measures over their children through systematic, publicly funded, professional programs.
- 3. *Universal "Head Start" preschool programs*. Preschool programs can provide an efficient non-coercive control over young children that is essential for developing high levels of self-control. In addition, these programs can help for adaptation to school and to reduce non-compliance through the early periods of school.
- 4. *Expanded and enhanced public education*. An expanded public education and equal opportunities for all to access free public education are essential for creating a coercion-free society.
- 5. *National service program*. DCT suggests a two-year national service programs that is to be completed after secondary education in exchange for vocational and educational stipends for achieving that program. This program will (1) give people a chance to be involved in their communities in an adult role during a period of time when they are most at risk for criminal and delinquent involvements, (2) enhance their commitment to the society, and (3) benefit society through the services of these young people.
- 6. *Enhanced workplace environment*. A vital element of a non-coercive society should include enhancing the environment and quality of workplaces as well as jobs. Youths should be encouraged to pursue higher education with the promise of non-coercive, high-quality jobs. Coercive work places will alienate workers and lead them into illegal opportunities. In addition, coercion at workplaces will induce coercive relations for workers in their families.
- 7. *Programs for economic growth and expanded productivity*. Reducing impersonal coercion requires sustainable economic growth and increased

productivity that will subsequently amplify quality of life for people from different layers of the society.

- 8. *A more progressive tax system.* The economic system should maintain a balanced and equal distribution of national wealth through a progressive tax system. Such a tax system will enhance the feelings of justice among people and help government develop and implement social programs to create a non-coercive society.
- 9. *Community organizing and criminal opportunity reduction.* There needs to be strong ties among the individuals of a community for effective crime reduction programs. Such strong ties will help reduce coercive interpersonal relations.

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See also

- [Agnew, Robert: General Strain Theory](#)
- [Braithwaite, John: Reintegrative Shaming Theory](#)
- [Colvin, Mark, Francis T. Cullen, and Thomas Vander Ven: Coercion, Social Support, and Crime](#)
- [Colvin, Mark, and John Pauly: A Structural Marxist Theory of Delinquency](#)
- [Cullen, Francis T.: Social Support and Crime](#)
- [Peacemaking Criminology](#)
- [Regoli, Robert M., and John D. Hewitt: Differential Oppression Theory](#)

#### References and Further Readings

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