



# The Great Escape:

How Religion alters the Delinquent  
Behavior of High-Risk Adolescents

by Byron R. Johnson and  
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# The Great Escape:

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How Religion alters the Delinquent  
Behavior of High-Risk Adolescents

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**D**oes individual religious commitment serve as a buffer in supporting high-risk youth (such as those living in poor inner-city areas) escape drug use and other illegal activities? Inadequacies of support structures in poor inner-city black communities lead many black youth into criminal and other delinquent activities. However, there are protective factors which help numerous youth in those communities stay out of trouble. We predict that individual religiosity will demonstrate itself to be one of those shielding factors. We expect that all other things being equal, religious commitment will act as a safeguard in protecting at-risk youth living in poor, inner-city black communities from socially undesirable activities. To test this proposition, we use data from an interview survey of 2,358 young black males from poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia. After analyzing the data, our results indicate that behavioral measures of religious commitment (the frequency with which one attends religious services) significantly reduce non-drug illegal activities, drug use, and drug dealing among disadvantaged youth. However, attitudinal measures of religious devotion (one's response to how important of a role religion plays in his or her life) is not significantly linked to reductions in juvenile delinquency. In this study, we discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of our findings, indicate the shortcomings of previous research, and provide direction for further investigation to focus on individual religiosity as a potentially important protective factor for high-risk disadvantaged youth.

**I** nner-city, poverty stricken, male black youth are one of the highest-risk groups for criminal activity in the United States.<sup>1</sup> However, there is certainly reason to observe differences in behavioral outcomes among high-risk youth living in those same environments. Many adolescents burdened with every disadvantaged life condition possible outperform the expectations and develop into well-adapted individuals. How can we predict who will overcome the risk factors and who will not? What indicators help our nation's most at-risk population succeed? The variation in deviance among youth in equally socially disorganized communities, as suggested by the "resilient youth" perspective (e.g. at-risk kids succeeding in the midst of disadvantage and blight), can be explained by the extent to which an individual adolescent is protected by relationships with social support networks such as family attachments. In the present study, we examine the potential importance of religious commitment in protecting and supporting black male youth in escaping from the crime of inner cities.

## The Story as Told Before

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that inner-city black youth, (especially males) are one of the groups most at risk for participation in criminal activity.<sup>2</sup> According to the social disorganization theory, the problematic make-up and inherent disadvantages within inner-city black communities lead many youth living in these communities into unlawful and immoral activities.<sup>3</sup> Many urban black youth, however, do not turn to crime and deviance, even though they live in socially chaotic communities. That is, a significant portion of youth in the face of communal hardship, develop through adolescence without serious behavioral problems.<sup>4</sup> Thus, much research has been done to understand the factors that protect these disadvantaged young people from negative community influences.

Researchers studying "resilient youth" are interested in identifying what they call "protective factors," which buffer or shield at-risk children and adolescents such as inner-city African-American youth from destructive behavior and costly societal outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Although the protective factors most often studied include variables determining the impact of family, school, and peer relations upon deviance of at-risk youth,<sup>6</sup> individual religious commitment has also been found to be a significant factor, even though resilience researchers have studied it infrequently.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, criminological researchers repeatedly find significant effects of individual religious devotion reducing socially undesirable activities among adolescents, especially moderate deviance such as alcohol and drug use.<sup>8</sup> We are still lacking research, though, on whether religious commitment protects at-risk adolescents who live in poverty tracts, such as urban black youth, from engaging in crime and other delinquent activities.

## Religion as a Protective Factor

In the present study, we define individual religiosity as the extent to which an individual's attitudes and behaviors reflect the commitment to the religion he or she professes.<sup>9</sup> Applying this definition presumes that urban black youth who are religiously committed are expected to attend religious services with a greater frequency (behavioral measure) and attach a greater deal of importance in their lives to religion (attitudinal measure) as compared with those who are less committed. Thus, indicators of religious behavior and the attitudes one expresses towards religion can measure the concept of religiosity.<sup>10</sup>

Why, though, should we expect religiously committed adolescents to be more likely than their non-religious peers to refrain from deviant activities? A fundamental answer is that those youth who frequently attend religious services and consider religion an important part of their lives are more likely to be bonded to an institution of informal social control which non-religious youth are not, namely, religious institutions such as the church.<sup>11</sup> Thus, sanctions derived from religion, which non-religious youth are less likely to be subject to, are expected to influence the activities that religious youth partake in. As far as guidance is concerned, youth regularly attending church are expected to: (1) be attached to the church (i.e., church members and groups); (2) be committed to church teachings and principles; (3) be involved in church-oriented activities and lifestyles; (4) have conventional beliefs developed through the church and strengthened through their religion and (5) have been exposed to an overload of rationale favorable to conformity over those favorable to deviance.

We predict therefore that religious inner-city black male youth are less likely than their non-religious peers to engage in criminal and other socially undesirable activities. In other words, we expect the religiosity-delinquency relationship to be an inverse relationship (as religiosity increases, the likelihood of delinquency decreases) and remain significant even after controlling for other predictors of deviance that are connected to or consequences of religious bonding. For example, church attending youth are expected to show stronger attachment to parents, greater commitment to school, and/or more involvement in conventional activities because of their beliefs, which in turn reduces their chance of making delinquent friends and engaging in negative behavioral activities as compared to non-church attending youth. It is also likely that church attending youth live with parents who teach similar principles. Thus, to control for potential unauthentic effects (those effects resulting from factors other than the subject's religiosity and therefore not relevant to this particular study), it is necessary to separate the religious effect from the effect of other social institutions such as the family and school.

## Data and Measurement

Data for the present study were drawn from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), an association of research economists interested in analyzing black youth joblessness in America. NBER researchers created a survey (the Survey of Inner-City Black Youth) that made it possible to study the problems facing black youth located in areas saturated with poverty. They developed this survey as a response to the shortcomings of governmental data in examining and understanding the problem of unemployment among American black youth in the inner-city. According to Harvard University Professor and National Bureau of Economic Research Economist Richard

Freeman,<sup>12</sup> the NBER survey on inner-city black youth provides the most detailed information on the largest sample of such youth available in social science research. Our exhaustive review of available data sets confirms that the NBER remains the only such comprehensive data set to focus on inner-city black youth residing in poverty tracts, thus supporting the assessment by Freeman.

Administered in 1979 and 1980, the NBER surveyed black males, ages 16 to 24, residing in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia.<sup>13</sup> The sample accounted for persons living on city blocks identified by the 1970 census as having at least 70 percent black residents and at least 30 percent of families living below the poverty line. While still allowing for within sample differences in order to examine the effects of individual religiosity and adolescent deviance, this sampling approach is ideal for the present study as it focuses on disadvantaged inner-city black youth. Well over 2,800 survey interviews were attempted in the worst poverty tracts of these three cities, and more than 2,300 interviews were completed. The response rate of 82.6 percent provides confidence that the data reflect a representative sample in these three cities.<sup>14</sup>

### **Measures of Delinquency**

In the NBER data set, each item of delinquency is measured on a “yes” or “no” scale. The respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they committed any illegal activities over the past 12 months among other questions (see Appendix A). We differed among three types of illegal activities: (1) Non-drug crime; (2) drug use; and (3) drug dealing. These dependent variables were then analyzed to determine which types of crime are consistently affected by religiosity.

### **Measures of Religiosity**

Researchers are understandably skeptical or at least concerned about the validity of using the single item of church attendance as the only measure of religiosity as it “might so closely reflect family expectations and life styles, or even parental coercion.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the religious commitment one measures when examining church attendance is in fact the religious commitment of the subjects’ families or parents rather than that of the subjects themselves. However, most previous research has used church attendance as the only measure of religious commitment, and in general, such determinations have been supported by a significant inverse relationship between that type of religiosity measure and deviance, at least when ignoring other possible factors.<sup>16</sup> While some studies report that the inverse relationship between religiosity and deviance substantially decreases as other theoretical variables (e.g., family or formal control variables) are introduced into the initial equation, there has been no convincing argument made that church attendance is an unacceptable or invalid measure of religious commitment. To the contrary, a recent study for example “confirms the efficacy of behavioral indicators of religiosity (usually attendance) so prevalent in prior research.”<sup>17</sup> While our procedural goal should be to treat religiosity as a concept that encompasses many different components,<sup>18</sup> we consider church attendance to be a reasonably valid, though not perfect, measure of religiosity for criminology as well as other fields.<sup>19</sup> Given the fact that the youth themselves report their level of church attendance, we believe it is reasonable to assume their assessment primarily measures their religiosity as opposed to that of their parents.

In this study, we do however aim to appease the aforementioned concerns by determining religiosity using two items: (1) a behavioral measure—the frequency of attending church services (henceforth, church attendance), and (2) an attitudinal measure—the perceived importance of religion in one’s life (henceforth religious salience). The first is simply a measure of church attendance based on the respondents’ answers to the question: “In the last twelve months, about how often have you attended religious services?” Response categories were: more than once a week; once a week; two or three times a month; once a month; several times a year; and not at all.

The subjects’ attitudinal measure (religious salience), was examined with the following question: “How strong a role does religion play in your life?” Response categories were: very strong; strong; somewhat strong; weak, and none.

## Methods

In order to control for differences between cities when evaluating subjects’ religiosity, we created a two-tier hierarchical model to analyze the data. This procedure allowed us to isolate changes in religiosity from that of other factors in order to estimate the effects of religion on individual behavior more accurately. The NBER data were collected from three cities. By separating subjects among cities, we were able to create the desired two-level structure with cities defining level two while the subjects defined level one.<sup>20</sup> (For a more detailed analysis of the two-tier structure, see Appendix B)

By utilizing the three dependent variables of non-drug crime, drug use and drug dealing, we created three separate models or ways to test the independent effect of religiosity on each of those offense categories. The key independent variables in the model were church attendance and religious salience.

In addition, several variables shown to be causes and correlates of crime<sup>21</sup> were added in order to separate the effect of religiosity from other possible influential factors. These variables include age, education, single parent at age 14, public housing, household size, belief in education and work, commitment to work, productive hours, and gang membership (detailed descriptions of these variables are provided in Appendix A).<sup>22</sup>

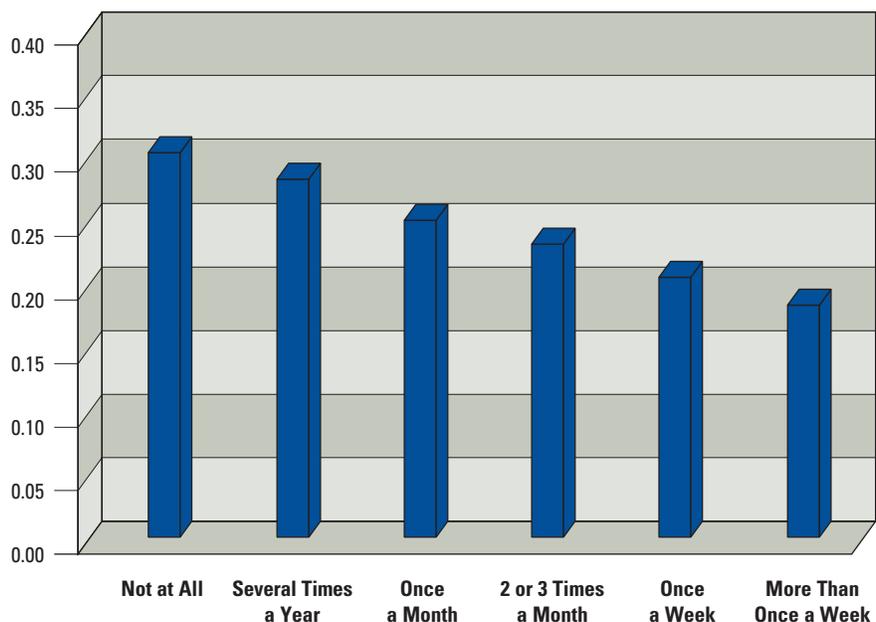
## Results

Because we utilize cross-sectional data (data from a single point in time), rather than longitudinal data (collected at multiple points over time) to develop our conclusions in this study, causal inferences are harder to maintain. However, if after controlling for other variables of informal social control (e.g. family and school) we still find a significant effect of either measure of religiosity on deviance, there is strong support that an inner-city black youth’s religiosity may play an independent and significant role as an additional protective factor.

### Data Analyses

Separate analyses were done for each of the three dependent variables to test the relationship between religiosity and each delinquency measure. This allowed us to adjust for different sources of impact in order to determine

**Figure 1. Church Attendance and the Probability of Non-Drug Crime**



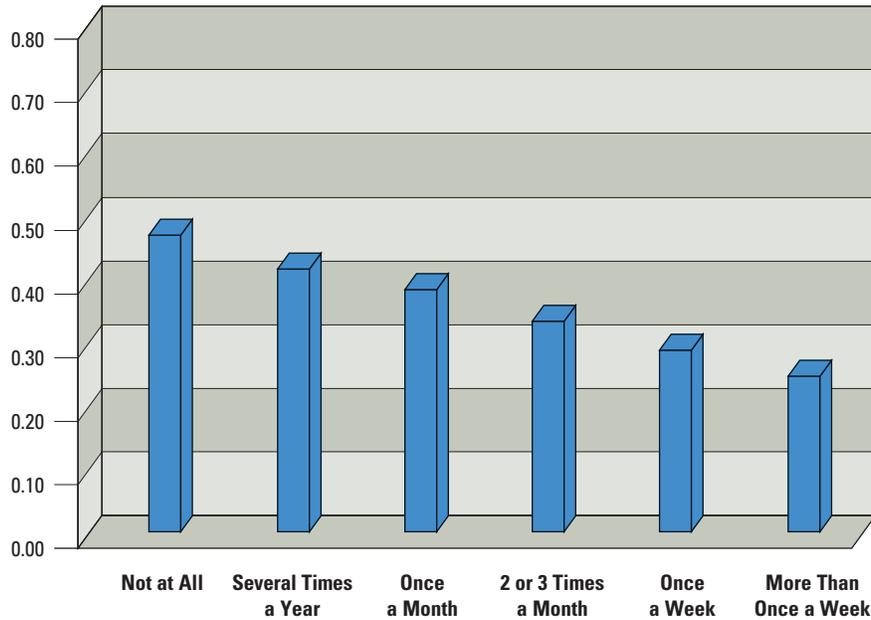
the net effect of religiosity or religious commitment on measures of deviance. Both measures of religiosity (church attendance and attitudes towards religion) were then compared with each delinquency measure (non-drug crime, drug use, and drug dealing) to examine the effects of the two measures of religiosity on the outcome, while controlling for demographic characteristics, family background, social bonding, and gang membership.

Our results indicate that the influence of church attendance has a positive effect on the reduction of deviance and is significant across all three measures of deviance (logistic coefficients and odds ratios for all the variables shown in Appendix C). On the other hand, the perceived importance of religion in one's life (religious salience) is not significantly related to any of the three deviance measures.

Several other variables also have significant effects upon the dependent variables. Most of these effects are in the expected direction. As far as non-drug crime is concerned, greater age, residence in public housing and gang membership increase the likelihood for such crime whereas smaller household size, belief in job and education, and hours spent involved with productive activities reduce the likelihood of non-drug crime. For crimes involving drug use, age and gang membership increase the probability of drug use, while commitment to work and hours in productive activities reduce the prospect of such deviance. Lastly, hours spent in productive activities reduce the likelihood of involvement in drug dealing while gang membership increases that probability.

Our findings suggest that church attendance (a behavioral measure of religiosity) and religious salience (an attitudinal measure of religiosity) are different forms of religiosity that may or may not coincide in their impact or lack thereof on distinct categories of deviance. The current findings in fact demonstrate that church attendance not only impacts minor crimes, but more serious forms of deviance as well. Noting our differing results when analyzing religiosity through church attendance and then by means of religious salience, our research indicates that in order to make any substantial claims, research exploring the religiosity-deviance relationship ought to include more than one measure of religiosity.

**Figure 2. Church Attendance and the Probability of Drug Use**



For our analysis we used a set of predicted probabilities to show how different levels of church attendance reduce the likelihood of criminal involvement (for table information, see Appendix D). When computing the probabilities of deviance, all the variables other than church attendance were held constant at their means. In general, the probability of deviance declined as the level of church attendance increased. As indicated in Figure 1, the probability of committing a non-drug crime decreased from .31 for those who did not attend church to .19 for those respondents who attended church more than once a week, holding all other variables at their means. Overall, this represents a 39 percent reduction in the probability of committing a non-drug crime.

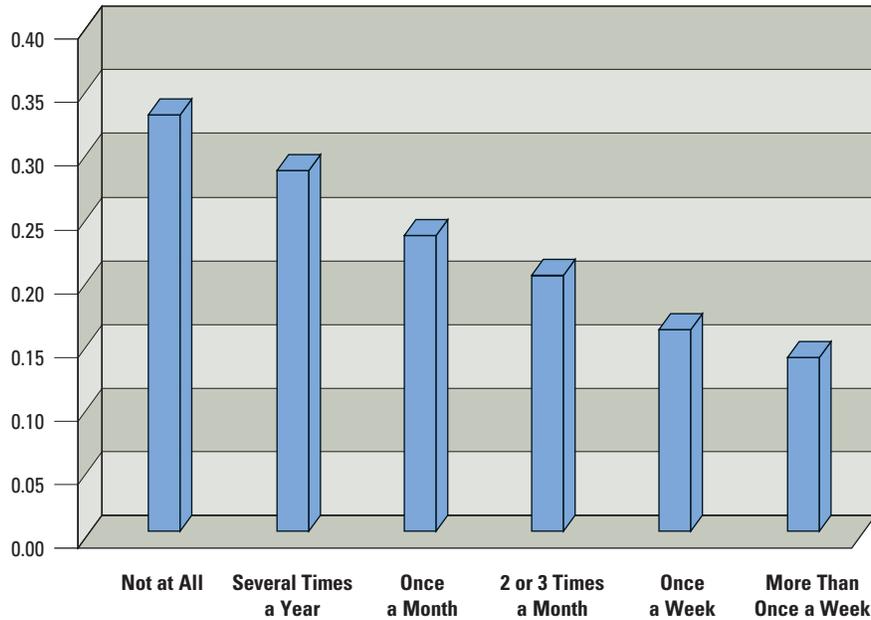
Similarly, the probability of drug use decreased from .48 for youth reporting they do not attend church to .26 for those attending more than once a week (see Figure 2). This translates to a 46 percent reduction in the probability of drug use. Finally, Figure 3 shows that the probability of drug dealing decreased from .33 to .14 for frequent church attendees (those attending more than once a week) over non-attendees, yielding a 57 percent reduction in the probability of drug dealing among frequent church attendees versus those who report they do not attend at all.

## Conclusion

Our findings suggest that church attendance has a significant impact on various measures of deviance among disadvantaged youth living in poverty tracts. This pattern remains significant even after controlling for background and non-religious or secular bonding and learning variables.

Finding a significant effect of church attendance in reducing the likelihood of deviance is not an uncommon finding for criminologists.<sup>23</sup> But previous researchers have tended to report that the effect of church attendance is at best, indirect.<sup>24</sup> Our findings differ however in that we find that the effect of church attendance on deviance remains consistently significant among multiple degrees of deviance within our target population (disadvantaged young black males in inner-city poverty tracts).

**Figure 3. Church Attendance and the Probability of Drug Dealing**



Like previous researchers, we measured religiosity through analysis of church attendance and the perceived importance of religion in one's life. While church attendance is certainly not a perfect measure of religiosity, its validity, as numerous other researchers have upheld, is an adequate measure of religious commitment. Further, since our measure of church attendance is similar to that used by previous researchers, the differences between our findings and that of previous researchers cannot be explained through differing measurements. Thus, it is worth discussing what might have caused the conflicting findings between our study and previous research focusing on youth deviance.

Perhaps the obvious difference and possibly the exact explanation for why our findings differed from that of previous researchers is that we examined a different type of data. We utilized data collected from a representative urban sample of high-risk youth, inner-city black males. Previous studies that have reported no significant direct effect of youth religiosity on deviance tended to rely on limited samples with insufficiently representative proportions of disadvantaged youth. Specifically, researchers often analyzed data collected from a sample that contained an inordinately large number of rural youth.<sup>25</sup> Even when such researchers examined largely or exclusively urban data, their samples tended to be too small, lacked acceptable sampling frame, contained predominantly religious subjects, or drew from a relatively prosperous community.<sup>26</sup>

There is nothing inherently wrong with the methods previous researchers utilized when drawing from data sets with an abundance of youth who are religious or living in a rural or prosperous urban community. What it does though is reduce the likelihood of observing significant independent effects of religiosity on deviance for the few who might be disadvantaged. As Tittle and Welch described in their 1983 article, *Religiosity and Deviance: Toward a Contingency Theory of Constraining Effects*,<sup>27</sup> individual religiosity provides the greatest impact on behavior in highly secularized and run-down communities. It becomes least effective in highly integrated and organized communities where religious morality is redundant given the other sources of moral authority and social control.

Our findings at least partially support the argument of Tittle and Welch.<sup>28</sup> Church attendance does have an independent effect on non-drug crime, drug use, and drug dealing among disadvantaged youth. Such an indication should allow us to pursue the notion that individual religiosity may be a strong protective factor in keeping young black males distant from the various forms of deviance so often associated with inner-city poverty tracts. As a remedy for the detrimental social outcomes that occur in inner-city, poverty stricken areas we should look to strengthen weakened social control mechanisms (like the family) and encourage utilizing other support bases (such as religious institutions like churches), whose ability to offer social control remain largely intact.

Criminologists have historically focused on the causes of crime in poverty stricken urban locations. However, little attention has been paid to how we can circumvent the overwhelming prospect of deviance among disadvantaged urban youth whose chance to escape from the crime of inner-cities is relatively low. But such areas of crime deterrence could be quite relevant given the opportunity of many youth to determine what role religion will play in their lives. One could also argue that participating in a church community is the actual protective factor rather than just the means of social control. If this is true, if church attendance matters to adolescents as it does for many,<sup>29</sup> then we should begin to consider studying how inner-city churches may be linked with efforts to reduce crime and delinquency.

## Discussion

While we believe the findings of this study to be significant, we must however note several limitations in the current study. First, this is a cross-sectional study, and we will not argue that cross-sectional data are as good as longitudinal data. However, we believe that cross-sectional studies like ours can still make an important contribution since the present data allow us to examine individual differences in estimating the effect of religiosity on deviance. Second, even though we argue earlier in this article that church attendance, as a single item factor is an acceptable, if not a preferred measure of religiosity, it would certainly be beneficial to account for many different measures of religiosity in future studies.

Finally, we were not able to examine whether youth religiosity has a significant independent effect on deviance for groups other than black males living in inner cities and develop a comparison group. While we suspect that the effect of religiosity on deviance is equally apparent regardless of race or sex or any other individual characteristic, future research will dictate the direction we shall pursue in our crime reduction strategies.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the present study sheds new light on the issue of youth religiosity and deviance by consistently finding a significant independent effect of church attendance on various forms of deviance among inner-city black male youth. Our findings document that the effect of religiosity in the reduction of deviance among at risk youth is valid and not simply an indirect consequence of another factor. Rather they demonstrate the importance of church attendance as a protective factor for disadvantaged youth from socially disorganized communities, where the family, school, and neighborhood often tend to function poorly. These initial results clearly warrant further investigation.

APPENDIX A .

## Variables and Measurement

Variable	Description	Scale
Drug Use	Has respondent used marijuana or other illegal drugs?	0. No 1. Yes
Drug Dealing	Has respondent sold marijuana or drugs during the last four weeks?	0. No 1. Yes
Non Drug Crime	Has respondent done any illegal activity within the last twelve months, including: Illegal gambling, Sold stolen goods, Burglary, Shoplifted/stole from cars, Mugging or purse snatching, Robbery, Cashed/forged stolen checks, Congame, swindle, or fraud, and Other Illegal activities Index crime.	0. No 1. Yes
Church attendance	In the last twelve months, about how often have you attended religious services? (Reverse coded)	6. More than once a week 5. Once a week 4. 2 or 3 times a month 3. Once a month 2. Several times a year 1. Not at all
Religious salience	How strong a role does religion play in your life? (Reverse coded)	5. Very strong 4. Strong 3. Somewhat strong 2. Weak 1. None
Age	How old are you (in years)?	15–24
Education completed	What is the highest grade or year of regular school that you have actually completed?	1–17
Both parents present at age 14	Were you living with both your mother and your father when you were 14 years old?	0. No 1. Yes
Public housing	Living in public housing or housing project?	0. No 1. Yes
Household size	Number of persons in household?	0–18
Belief in education and work	If you work hard and get a good education you'll get ahead in America. Is that ____? (Reverse coded)	3. True 2. Somewhat true 1. Not true at all
Commitment to work	Index of two items: (a) importance of being able to find steady work and (b) importance of working at a job ( $\alpha = 0.66$ )	1. Not at all important 2. Somewhat important 3. Very important
Productive hours	Proportion of daily hours spent on the following activities: (1) working for pay, (2) travel to or from work, (3) in school, (4) working around the house, (5) reading books, (6) studying/doing homework, (7) searching for a job, (8) watching children/keeping house	0–0.72
Gang membership	Are you a member of a street club or gang?	0. No 1. Yes
Boston	Is respondent living in Boston?	0. No 1. Yes
Chicago	Is respondent living in Chicago?	0. No 1. Yes
Philadelphia	Is respondent living in Philadelphia?	0.No 1.Yes

## Multilevel Hierarchical Analysis

In the multilevel hierarchical analysis, the level one model must be specified first since it determines the meaning of the level two model. The level one model can be summarized by the following formula:

$$\gamma_{ij} = \sum_{k=0}^p \beta_{ik} x_{ijk} + e_{1ij} \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  is the index for subjects,  $j$  is the index for cities,  $k$  is the index for explanatory variables, and  $x_{ijk}$  is an explanatory variable that varies across individuals. A level two model can be specified for a coefficient in the level one model that varies across cities:

$$\beta_{ik} = \beta_i + e_{2ij} \quad (2)$$

where  $\beta_i$  is the city-level intercept and  $e_{2ij}$  is the level-two residual for the coefficient associated with the  $k^{\text{th}}$  variable.<sup>30</sup>

APPENDIX C.

## Logistic Coefficients and Odds Ratios from Binomial Two-level Hierarchical Model of Involvement in Non-Drug Crimes, Drug Use, and Drug Dealing

	Non-Drug Crimes		Drug Use		Drug Dealing	
	$\gamma$	odd ratio	$\gamma$	odd ratio	$\gamma$	odd ratio
Intercept	-.63 (.63)	.53	-1.17 (.49)	.31	-2.73 (.93)	.07
Church attendance	-.13 (.04)	.88	-.20 (.03)	.82	-.22 (.07)	.81
Religious Saliency	-.03 (.05)	.97	-.04 (.04)	.96	.02 (.08)	1.02
Age	.04 (.03)	1.04	.14 (.02)	1.14	.06 (.04)	1.06
Education	-.04 (.04)	.96	-.05 (.04)	.95	.05 (.07)	1.05
Both parents at 14	-.04 (.12)	.96	-.12 (.09)	.89	.07 (.17)	1.07
Household size	-.04 (.02)	.96	.02 (.02)	1.02	-.05 (.04)	.96
Public housing	.20 (.12)	1.23	-.03 (.10)	.97	.08 (.18)	1.08
Belief in education and work	-.30 (.08)	1.35	-.06 (.07)	1.06	.18 (.12)	.83
Commitment to work	-.17 (.13)	.85	-.25 (.11)	.78	-.12 (.19)	.89
Productive hours	-1.43 (.20)	.24	-.82 (.18)	.44	-1.55 (.27)	.21
Gang membership	1.26 (.31)	3.53	1.25 (.30)	3.49	2.10 (.33)	8.17

APPENDIX D.

## Predicted Probabilities of Criminal Involvement by Level of Church Attendance

	Non-Drug Crimes	Drug Use	Drug Dealing
Not at all	.31	.48	.33
Several times a year	.29	.43	.29
Once a month	.26	.39	.24
2 or 3 times a month	.24	.34	.21
Once a week	.21	.30	.17
More than once a week	.19	.26	.14
Mean	.28	.42	.27

39% decline

46% decline

57% decline

## E N D N O T E S

- <sup>1</sup> While social disorganization is a macro-level concept and thus theories and research based on the perspective focus on aggregate-level relationships, its relevance to the present study is hard to ignore as a context for the individual-level causation of youth crime and deviance.
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- <sup>13</sup> Appendix A contains a variable-by-variable breakdown of the questions included in the NBER survey. Response categories as well as coding values are also displayed in the Appendix A.
- <sup>14</sup> As an additional check on the representativeness of the sample, characteristics of youth in the current survey were compared to those of youth from the same geographic areas surveyed in the 1980 census, and revealed no evidence of systematic biases.
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