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Sibley Y. Hawkins

The University of Texas at Austin

Forrest A. Novy

The University of Texas at Austin

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Cover Page Footnote

Sibley Y. Hawkins, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin; Forrest A. Novy, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin. This research was adapted from an honor's thesis project in the Department of Liberal Arts Honors at the University of Texas at Austin. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Forrest A. Novy, Inter-American Institute for Youth Justice, The University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work, 1 University Station D3500, Austin, Texas 78712. E-mail: fnovy@mail.utexas.edu

Self-Determination Theory and Juvenile Delinquency: A Validation of a Combined Theory for Understanding Youth in Conflict with the Law

Sibley Y. Hawkins

The University of Texas at Austin

Forrest A. Novy

The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

In this study, we propose an expanded theory of delinquency that integrates social learning, control, and motivationally based explanations of human behavior. We posit that delinquency occurs partly due to attempts to fulfill 3 developmentally necessary psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Melding elements of 3 theories (*Social Control Theory* [Hirschi, 1972], *General Crime Theory* [Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990], and *Self Determination Theory* [Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000a, 2008]), provides a better understanding of the precursors to delinquency and possible approaches to mitigating their impact. The study examines: (a) the extent to which the 3 basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) are relevant constructs to discussing delinquency, (b) how the fulfillment of these needs varies in different environments (e.g., in school v. in the hood), and (c) ways to address these needs to mitigate delinquency and school failure. Twenty-seven adjudicated youths from a county detention program completed a questionnaire regarding the extent to which the 3 constructs were relevant in their lives, and if the meeting of these needs varied as a function of setting. Seven interviews were also conducted to expand upon survey results. Findings support the following constructs: that the attitudes of youths vis-à-vis these basic needs can and will vary significantly in different settings; and that delinquency prevention and school reform will be enhanced when the basic needs of a student (i.e., to be respected [*autonomy*], to be engaged [*relatedness*], and to experience success [*competence*]), are met.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency, self-determination theory, well-being, control theory, youth violence, youth motivation

Many court-involved youths today are in crisis. High levels of school evasion, disproportionate minority representation, gang involvement, violence exposure (perpetrator as well as victim), drug abuse, and mental and emotional health-related lability make this one of today's most challenging and perplexing populations. In the U.S. in 2005, there were 1,697,900 documented instances of juvenile delinquency including: 1,400 murders, 26,000 robberies, 100,900 cases of vandalism, 13,700 nonviolent sex offenses, and 8,500 cases of arson among thousands of other documented offenses committed by juveniles (Sickmund, 2009). Social and behavioral scientists have long wondered why youth commit crimes. What does it really mean when a youth says he robbed a neighbor's house because it "felt good," joins a gang "cause [my friends] have my back. They protect me," or drops out of school because at school "teachers put me down," (participants B7 and G3, respectively; Personal

Communication, May 25, 2010)? It seems that the most frequent answers given by youth to questions about motives often pertain in some part to basic, inherent psychological needs.

The authors believe that a robust and parsimonious theory of crime must, in the end, account for any relationships between a child's motivations and needs and his or her life choices, whether socially positive or negative. This paper explores the value of a particular and current motivational theory, self-determination theory (SDT) (posited by the researchers Deci and Ryan [2000a]), in explaining delinquency. More specifically, the authors propose an expanded theory of delinquency that integrates social learning and control theories of delinquency with motivational-based explanations of human behavior. We argue that delinquency may occur as part of an individual's drive to fulfill three social and developmental psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), as originally put forward by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985), is a theory of motivation that presumes that people innately search for personal and psychological well-being and growth. Just as there are basic physical and physiological needs that must be fulfilled in

Sibley Y. Hawkins, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin; Forrest A. Novy, School of Social Work, The University of Texas at Austin.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Forrest A. Novy, Inter-American Institute for Youth Justice, The University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work, 1 University Station D3500, Austin, Texas 78712. E-mail: fnovy@mail.utexas.edu

order to survive, many argue that there are also basic psychological needs that are imperative to normal human development and functioning (e.g., Maslow, 1943; Murray, 1938; White, 1959). Yet, according to Deci and Ryan (2000a), the search for personal and psychological well-being and growth is, of course, also significantly determined by the extent to which precisely those basic psychological needs have been and continue to be met. Thus, SDT is grounded in the notions of development and personal drive or motivation, including the suppositions that human needs are inherent (Hull, 1943), psychological (Maslow; Murray), and operational (White).

Hull (1943), a learning theorist, influenced Deci and Ryan with his belief that there are specific needs which are absolutely vital for achieving optimal human functioning, though the needs delineated by Hull differed slightly from those that the SDT researchers would eventually outline. Also influential was the work of Murray (1938), which stated that human needs are psychological in nature. He paved the way for defining human needs as psychological concepts, though lacking the emphasis that Ryan, Deci, and Hull put on such needs as absolutely essential for functioning. A final influence on SDT's categorization of needs comes from behavior and motivation theorist White (1959). Deci and Ryan drew from White's idea that needs are operational; that is, that they serve some purpose for a human being. White believed that behaviors serve not only to interact with, but also to enhance one's environment, a notion he felt was lacking in preceding theories of behavior and motivation. From these theorists' ideas about what constitutes a basic psychological need, Ryan and Deci (2000a) induced three constructs essential for optimal psychological functioning: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2000b) defined: (a) autonomy as a sense of self-regulation and control over the events of one's life; (b) competence as an individual's feeling that he or she is capable and competent in at least some area, providing a sense of confidence and self-respect; and (c) relatedness as a feeling of deep connectedness to the world in which the individual lives. When these three basic psychological needs are met, Deci and Ryan posited that humans are able to participate in the ongoing search for improved psychological well-being. SDT asserts that the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs allows an individual to be intrinsically motivated to perform pro-social and productive activities. As this paper will show, applying SDT to an understanding of juvenile delinquency sheds new light on youth behaviors. It reveals a discrepancy between external views of anti-social behavior and youths' own perceptions of their actions. In other words, it uncovers the apparent benefits to a youth of what to the outside observer seems to be self-destructive associations and explains the possible advantages of so-called anti-social behavior to youth. Namely, it can be a means to fulfilling precisely those psychological and emotional needs related to the attainment of well-being that youth desire most urgently. This study suggests that rather than being a negative force in a youth's life, factors of delinquency can in themselves be a means to meeting one's basic needs when other, more positive, outlets have failed to do so.

Self-determination theory and the link to delinquency.

Most commonly, SDT as a theory for motivation has been applied to areas of positive functioning, such as

work, education, and health (e.g., Ilardi, Leone, Kasser, and Ryan, 1993; Sheldon, Williams, & Joiner, 2003). However, the theory does not completely leave out the subject of motivation for less positive, more anti-social behaviors. Ryan and Deci (2000c) recognize and state that:

When these needs are met, growth and integration result, but when they are not met, a variety of non-optimal outcomes accrue...SDT is concerned...with the more phenomenologically salient anxieties, insecurities, ego involvements, and heartbreaks concerning threats to basic needs, which we suggest provide more common and proximal sources of phenomena expressing the darker sides of human nature such as depression, hate, violence, and the degradation of self and others. (p. 320)

According to SDT, non-optimal outcomes will occur concomitantly with the thwarting of needs. Nevertheless, the theory does not elaborate to say that often times these non-optimal outcomes are not necessarily outcomes at all, but rather they are non-optimal means for seeking need fulfillment when the more ideal or pro-social forms of doing so have indeed been thwarted. This point is not included in SDT, but it is an important one that should be considered when applying the concepts of SDT to the case of juvenile delinquency.

Empirical and anecdotal accounts of youth offenders lacking in one or more of the three needs defined in SDT are found in journalist John Hubner's (2005) *Last Chance in Texas*. He chronicled the lives of young offenders at the Giddings State School's Capital and Serious Violent Offender Group program. In telling his *crime story*, which is a complete account of every crime a youth has committed, one young offender recounts his need for control (autonomy). Speaking about threatening his younger brother with knives, and in this particular case, a gun, the youth remembers, "I'd do it just to do it. It was fun to see him scared, running away from me. It felt good to have control over that situation. I liked it" (Hubner, p. 123). After a life filled with abuse, abandonment, and a constant lack of control, delinquency became the only way that youth knew how to give himself back some of that autonomy.

Relatedness, when not met through conventional means (e.g., through family, friends, or guiding mentors) might also be attained through other means. Perhaps the most prevalent and obvious example of youth seeking other connections is gang involvement. One Brazilian study (Campos & Raffaelli, 1994) looked at the differences in the lifestyles of children living under apparently similar conditions. A significant distinction was that one group was considered *on the street*, while the other group was *of the street*. Children who are *on the street* are living in poverty and working at extremely young ages, but still have family ties and have a consistent place to sleep at night. Children *of the street* are the children with broken family ties who have no consistent place to return to at night. They are often forced to sleep in the streets or in other dangerous conditions. When the typical family setting was compromised for these youths (whether because of factors outside of their control, such as the death of a parent, or, more often, because of voluntary departure from an abusive setting), those impacted were inclined to seek out some other form of family. In other words, when their need for social relatedness was not fulfilled at home, the youth left, forced to find a way to fulfill that need elsewhere.

Self-determination theory's third and final basic need, competence, if left unfulfilled, might also lead to problematic outcomes for youths. Competence is often generally defined as the successful achievement of developmental tasks that fit within that youth's cultural, historic, and environmental context (Graber, Nichols, Lynn, Brooks-Gunn, & Botvin, 2006). It has been pointed out that this definition means that competence is then "inherently multidimensional, because there are multiple developmental tasks salient in a given age period in a given place and time in society" (Masten & Curtis, 2000, p. 533). These tasks can include academic achievement, performance in extracurricular activities, or high levels of self-esteem. What is important is that youths are able to develop a sense of achievement in each of these domains, allowing a healthy development of self-worth to occur.

A Proposed Amended Control Theory

There are substantial commonalities between SDT and other theoretical constructs that seek to understand the causes and nature of delinquency. Hirschi's (1972) social control theory is a sociological theory that seeks to explain crime by placing a large emphasis on relationships and social bonds as preventers of delinquency. He contends that internalization of society's norms is what essentially prevents human beings from committing delinquent acts, and that the key to internalization lies in attachment to others.

A later theory posited by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) is known as the general theory of crime. This theory puts far less emphasis on relationships and instead looks at self-control, or the extent to which an individual has control over his or her own life, as a motivating force. Self-control is connected to autonomy because, as Hirschi contends, a high need for autonomy is an indicator of low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi). As the need to assert one's own autonomy increases, the commitment to conform to others' norms, such as those of adults or authority figures, decreases (Agnew, 1984). Additionally, some scholars add that low self-control can also contribute to a decreased ability to succeed in social settings and institutions (Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway & Benson, 1997). Gottfredson and Hirschi affirmed that these ideas are key factors contributing to delinquency.

We suggest that when such basic needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness remain unmet in positive, pro-social ways, delinquency will often present itself as a viable option for youths to fulfill core psychological needs. In order to demonstrate this, we conducted a study involving youths in a county detention facility. Several key research questions guided the creation of the survey and in-depth follow-up interviews. These research questions are:

1. To what extent are basic psychological needs—*competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*—met in various ways across different social environments (e.g., school and social settings)?
2. To what extent are the three basic psychological needs, as defined in SDT, relevant constructs to describing and understanding youth committing delinquent acts?
3. In what ways can the three basic psychological needs—*competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*—be nurtured in

order to decrease or mitigate negative behaviors such as delinquency, violence, and victimization of others?

Method

Participants

Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the authors distributed a survey to 27 adjudicated youths in a county detention program. The participants responded to a 30-item questionnaire surveying the extent to which *autonomy*, *relatedness*, and *competence* are relevant in their lives and whether or not the meeting of these needs vary as a function of setting—school vs. neighborhood. Additionally, seven interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis to expand on and validate survey results.

The qualitative portion of the study consisted of a set of one-on-one student interviews. Interview questions in this study aimed to portray a more in-depth presentation of students' feelings in both neighborhood and school settings. Responses were also used to triangulate with survey findings and to provide deeper insights into their theoretical significance. Every attempt was made to remain objective throughout data collection and analysis. However, the authors recognize that in qualitative data analysis, personal experiences inevitably influence data interpretations. This study was conducted with the knowledge that the issue of juvenile delinquency is immensely complex, and that no one single theory or framework, including the idea being proposed, will explain it fully.

Participants in this study consisted of 27 students recruited from a central Texas county juvenile detention center. All youths were under the age of 17 and had been adjudicated at least once. Of the 27 students, 20 were male and 7 were female, reflecting a slightly higher proportion of females (35%) than is present in the entire population at the detention center, which is approximately 25%. Additional demographic information for the participating students was not made available due to reasons of privacy within the detention center.

The sampling design for this particular study was a multi-stage procedure in which the institution was selected first and the participants were subsequently chosen from the available pool (Babbie, 1990). The center was selected because of convenience, as well as for its relevant population. Every student within the residential program was asked in person if he or she wanted to participate in the study. The students were told that they would participate in an interview or a survey, but not both, and that neither component would last longer than 30 minutes. Students were also informed that they would not receive any compensation for participation. Additionally, students were told that a decision not to participate would not have any negative effects on treatment by staff, court hearings, probation, or any other related proceedings.

Twenty-eight students initially expressed interest in participating and signed youth assent forms. As participants were necessarily all minors, parental consent was also obtained before any data were collected. While consent forms were being obtained, seven of the students were either released or transferred to other programs. Six additional students who were not residing in the center during the initial requests for participa-

tion subsequently agreed to take part in the study and parental consent was obtained, making the final participant count 27.

Procedure

Quantitative procedure. Students were randomly assigned to either a survey group or an interview group so that the interview group would consist of approximately one third of the entire group. Of the 20 students selected for the survey group, 15 were male and 5 were female. Five males and 2 females composed the interview group. Throughout May 2010, surveys were administered in groups of two to five students, depending on availability at the time. The surveys were administered in such a way that ensured that no staff member was able to see any student's answers at any point. This guaranteed the confidentiality of the participants' responses and prevented any tensions from being created between staff and students based on the answers.

The instructions given remained the same for all groups. The scale was explained through unrelated examples (i.e., "I like chocolate ice cream") and students were instructed to identify how often each statement presented was true for them. Students were asked to be honest in their responses and to ask the researchers, who were present, if any statement was unclear. Students were told that they could skip any item that made them uncomfortable to answer but to otherwise try to answer every item. Each group was assured once again that no names would be attached to the surveys and that staff would never see their responses. Each participant was given an envelope with a coded number to place the surveys in and seal upon completion. The code assigned to each student was a way for the researchers to keep track of which students completed surveys and interviews and to ensure complete confidentiality for all other study purposes.

Measures. The quantitative measure used for the survey portion of the study was adapted from the *Basic Psychological Needs at Work Scale* designed to measure the extent to which the three concepts (competence, relatedness, and autonomy) are met in specific as well as general settings. This particular scale has been used by self-determination theory researchers Ryan and Deci (2000c), as well as others (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser, Davey, & Ryan, 1992). Items were modified to pertain to both school and social settings instead of a work setting to fit the needs of the study. Due to the fact that many of the students participating in the study were multiple grade levels behind in reading ability, the wording of the items were adjusted to a 5th grade reading level. Sample items used included: for competence, "At school I get the chance to show how much I know;" for relatedness, "My friends outside of school really care about me;" and for autonomy, "I am free to say my ideas and opinions at school." In the 30 item survey, there were 10 items related to each subscale (autonomy, relatedness, and competency). Within each subscale's 10 items, there were 4 items each directed at a school and a social setting, as well as 2 general items, not related to any specific domain. Students were then asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (always true) how often they felt that each statement was true for them in the particular setting indicated.

Cronbach's alpha test was performed to determine the extent to which scale items inter-related. This particular test is most commonly used for scale-type questions with more than one answer, such as the scale used in this measure. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .89, demonstrating high internal consistency and suggestive of item construct validity for the modified scale.

Qualitative procedure. Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis on site at the detention center. Each interview was recorded using an audio tape recorder and responses were later transcribed into a text document to facilitate analysis. Students were asked approximately ten open-ended questions designed to elicit attitudes and other personal experiences relating to school and neighborhood settings. Examples of questions include:

- a) "What frustrates you the most during the school day?"
- b) "What do you enjoy about being with your friends outside of school?"
- c) "Is it important to you to feel a sense of control in your life?"

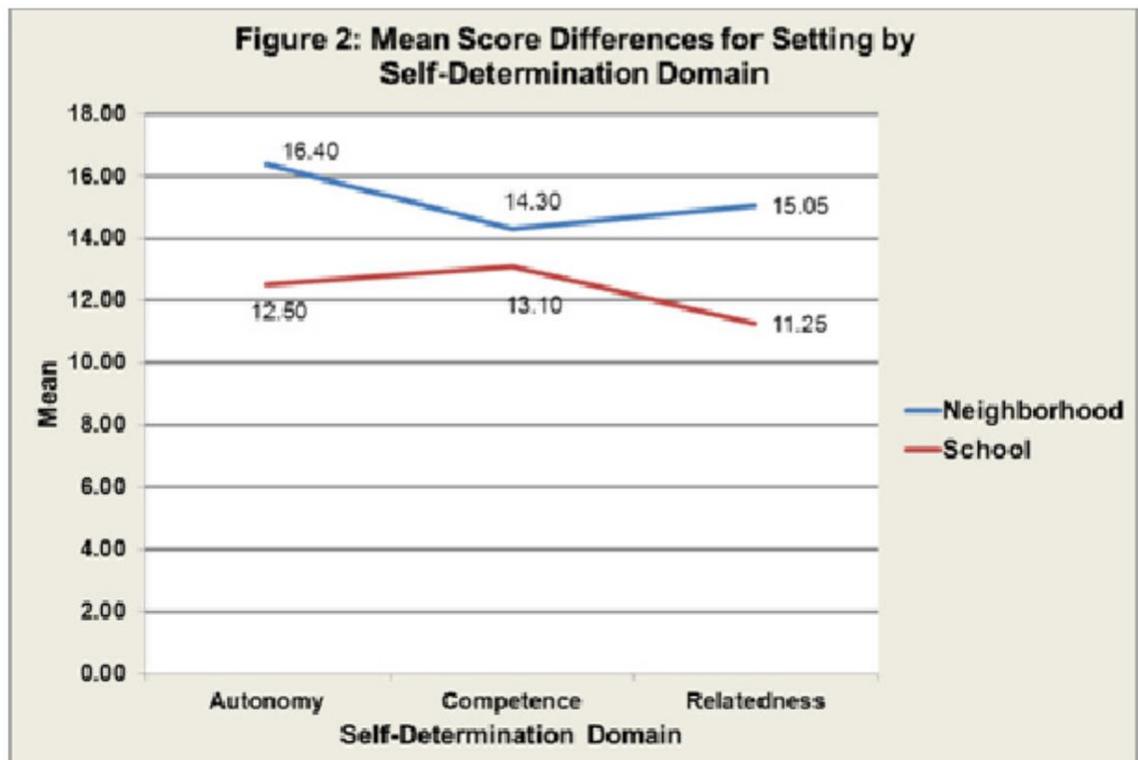
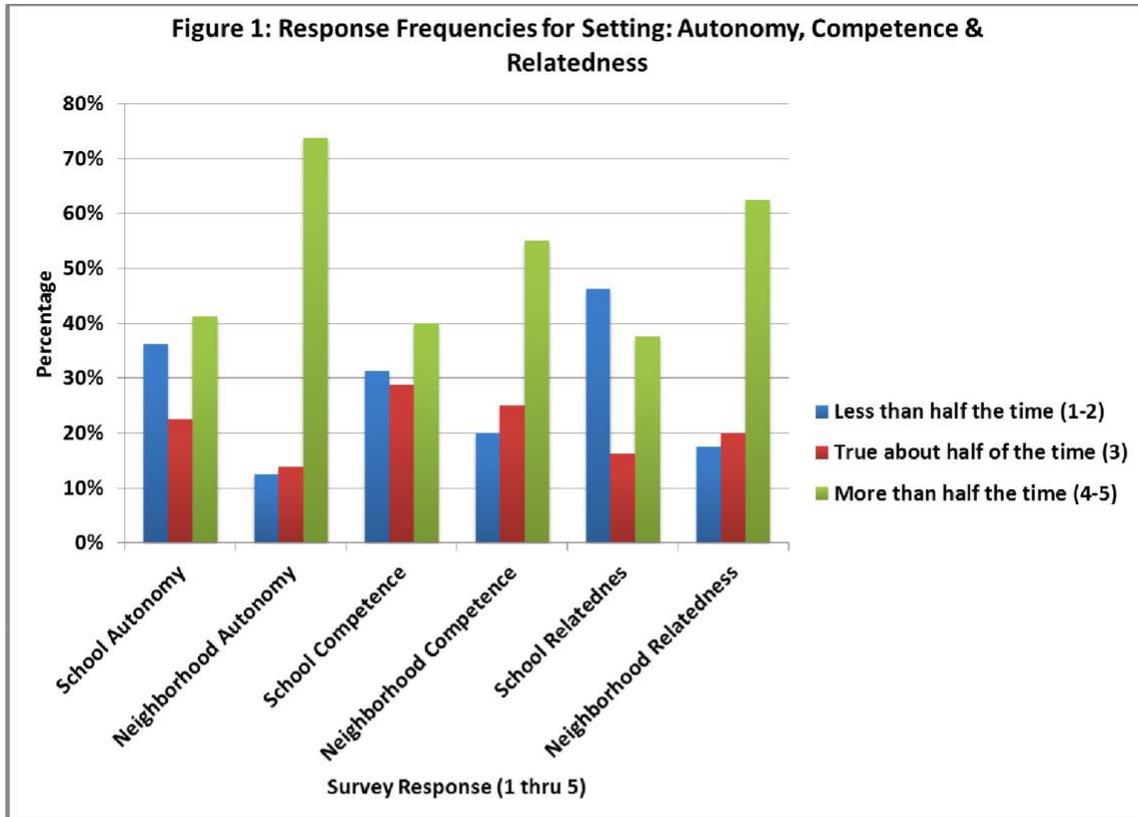
The coding and indexing procedure used in the qualitative data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, as well as after all data were compiled. Interviews were transcribed and coded into categories of "repeating ideas." The repeating idea codes helped to identify patterns in the students' perspectives on school and social situations. Once this initial coding process was complete, repeating ideas were further grouped into broader "theme codes." These larger, generalized patterns and ideas were subsequently sorted relative to our constructs of interest—*autonomy*, *relatedness*, and *competence*. More difficult to ensure than quantitative designs, internal validity for this section was sought through triangulation with survey results and replicating results with multiple student interviews.

Results

Quantitative Results

Initially self-determination (SD) survey responses were grouped broadly for setting by each sub-constructs' "truth" value (e.g., *Neighbor-Autonomy* vs. *School-Autonomy*) (see Figure 1). This involved organizing responses into three broad 'true' categories; those indicating a 'true' value 1 (less than half the time), 2 (about half the time), or 3 (more than half of the time). Means for each setting-by domain pairing were also calculated and compared (see Figure 2). Of the 600 possible answers to the surveys, only one response was missing.¹ As such a small percentage (< .2%) of the overall responses, the missing data point was replaced with the average of all the other responses to that item.

¹ The Likert-type scale used in our survey assumes that as interval data, participating students cannot distinguish differences between the absolute scale levels given (1-never true, 2-sometimes true, 3-true about half of the time, 4-true a lot of the time, 5-always true). The results then represent the underlying continuous distribution of agreement between the different variables of setting and construct.



For all statistical tests, a 99% confidence level, or an alpha level of .01 was used. Given the study's small sample size and paired group responses, correlated t-tests were performed to determine significant mean differences between settings and by SD domain. Initial t-tests comparing the total responses collapsing across SDT domains yielded a significant setting difference—school vs. neighborhood (see Table 1). The average SDT domain score for setting was significantly lower for school compared to neighborhood ($M = 36.85$ vs. 45.75 ; $t(19) = 4.722$, $p < .01$). To distinguish which of the three constructs contributed to this difference, paired t-tests were performed for each construct.

Based on these tests, significant mean differences were obtained for autonomy and relatedness. Review of these means revealed higher response values for neighborhood autonomy and relatedness than those reported in school (i.e., 16.40 vs. 12.5 and 15.05 vs. 11.25, respectively, as shown in Table 1).

Paired t-tests showed a significant difference in t-value for relatedness ($t(19) = 4.872$, $p < .01$) and autonomy ($t(19) = 4.561$, $p < .01$), but not competence ($t(19) = 1.224$, $p < .236$) (see Table 2). These results support the hypothesis that overall, self-determination constructs are being met at lower levels in school than in the adjudicated youths' neighborhood settings.

Table 1.

Means and sample sizes for each paired variable and overall setting variables

Variable Setting	Self-Determination	Mean	Std. Error	N
Neighborhood	1 Autonomy	16.400	.678	20
	2 Competence	14.300	.498	20
	3 Relatedness	15.050	.806	20
	4 Overall	45.750	1.68	20
School	1 Autonomy	12.500	.835	20
	2 Competence	13.100	.984	20
	3 Relatedness	11.250	.739	20
	4 Overall	36.850	2.04	20

Table 2

Results for paired sample t-tests among variable pairs

		Paired Differences					Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	
Overall	SDT Neighborhood-SDT School	8.900	8.429	1.885	4.722	19	.000***
Pair 1	Autonomy-Neighborhood - Autonomy-School	3.900	3.824	.855	4.561	19	.000***
Pair 2	Relatedness-Neighborhood - Relatedness School	3.800	3.488	.780	4.872	19	.000***
Pair 3	Competence-Neighborhood - Competence-School	1.200	4.384	.980	1.224	19	.236

Qualitative Results

Students' responses to interview questions expanded upon the results seen in the quantitative section. Responses echoed the low levels of relatedness and autonomy being met in school and provided deeper insight into how fully those constructs are met through a student's peer group. Several repeating patterns and themes emerged during the interviews (see Appendix). One related to poor teacher support and a desire for more engaged and understanding teachers. An oft-echoed response to the question of what one thing the student would change about his or her previous school setting was the way teachers interacted with them (e.g., "Teachers always single me out and yell at me. They pick on me for things that I do even when other

people are doing the same things"). Conversely, almost all students interviewed expressed positive school experiences in their current detention setting. One stated, for example, that teachers "really cared, believed in our abilities, and were there to provide help with work and other issues when it's needed." The positive connections they were making with teachers at their detention facility also seemed to link to an increased sense of competency and a desire to succeed. One student illustrated this when she noted that "It's like they challenge us here, they don't care. They will challenge us, they'll push us. They know how far we can go. And that's what I like."

School outside of the detention center was repeatedly described as boring. The importance of an engaging and hands-on curriculum was stressed by five of the students interviewed.

One student believes that, "If it was fun, I'd like school. If we were doing hands on activities. People don't like going to school because it's boring. If it was more hands on, people would go." Another theme that emerged when discussing school was the student's desire for a more autonomous setting, one in which they were afforded some say in daily experiences. The most positive school environments mentioned were those that allowed students to move at their own pace, gave opportunities for input, and generally afforded students more freedoms.

Dialogue around social settings and friend groups made it clear that the overarching draw for students was the sense of connectedness, love, respect, and support they receive from their friend groups and gangs; feelings that were often stated as lacking in the home, school, or both. One young male stated unabashedly, "My gang makes me feel loved, they support me and help me and my family out if there is something I need or my family needs. I never felt loved at home so they help me feel loved." While the importance of fitting in, being support-ed, and feeling respected was reiterated, six of the students also openly acknowledged that negative peer influences played a large role in their participation in anti-social activities, such as using drugs, skipping school, and being in gangs. A few students articulated a desire to distance themselves from those influences, but felt trapped in their gangs. "Once you're in, there is no way out. I'm stuck," stated one young man. Two students mentioned that if they could give any piece of advice to some-one younger, it would be to tell them "to surround himself with a good crowd, better influences and to stay in school and stuff."

As a reflection on the importance of relatedness in feeling competent, one student stated, "Making my mom proud feels good. She feels proud when I do well and that makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I could do something." More often though, this positive familial presence either was not mentioned or was openly stated as missing. A sense of disconnectedness and the feeling that nobody in a student's life cared about them proved to be a volatile combination when mixed with a youth with limited tools for coping with anger and frustration productively. "I just get really frustrated. Like when people make me mad it just makes me want to do something bad," said one young male. Responses highlighted the strong interconnectedness between the three basic psychological need domains, as it seems that each one plays on and stems from the others, whether in a negative or a positive way.

Discussion

Viewing self-determination and negatively enacted need fulfillment as explanations of juvenile delinquency has merit for the understanding of youthful offenders. Delinquency, instead of being a result of failed relationships, low self-control, and decreased competence is, according to this model, the path youths take to satisfy their needs. Our data suggest that when an individual's core psychological needs are not met in positive, pro-social ways, he or she will pursue other means, including anti-social options when available.

Results, both quantitative and qualitative, indicate that SDT's construct domains - *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* - can and do inform our understanding of youths' motivations and behaviors. Overall, the results suggest that autonomy,

competence, and relatedness are not being adequately fulfilled in school. A significant number of students (from a third to almost half depending on the domain) felt these needs were met infrequently or less than half the time. This was in stark contrast to the hood where the same needs were being met significantly more often (see Figure 1). If such needs are basic, developmentally-driven psychological necessities, the authors propose, as do others (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008; Nance & Novy, 2010) that many of today's *disadvantaged* youth will seek out need fulfilling experiences (some damagingly *anti-social*) as they actively avoid ones associated with diminished self-esteem, lowered sense of competence, and negative peer and adult relationships.

For years we have seen schools failing to meet the basic learning needs of our most disadvantaged youths, and the link between underachievement and school disengagement is well established. If students, particularly those who are at risk of falling behind, are to remain interested and active in school, implementing stimulating, rigorous, and relevant coursework in every classroom whenever possible is imperative. Moreover, teacher support and communication are vital for any of that to matter. A majority of the students interviewed in our study mentioned one single teacher who had been supportive of him or her. According to the students, this support had a positive impact on their feelings about school. Yet, despite these individual instances of connectedness, the data show that school failed to meet these students' need to feel respected, capable, and connected. Thus, one contribution of our study would be to suggest that schools (teachers and administrators) would profit from understanding youth motivations. This would include taking into account students' need for experiences that affirm their sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While teachers are not solely responsible for the well-being of their students, they are in a unique and skilled position to transform a student's life.

Therefore, Ryan and Deci (2000a) assert that, "failing to provide supports for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, not only of children but also of students, employees, patients, and athletes, socializing agents and organizations contribute[s] to alienation and ill-being" (p. 740). Juvenile delinquency is too often seen merely as a direct response to some internal or external circumstance (i.e., the result of a cycle of disengagement and disconnectedness). By looking instead at delinquency as part of youths' attempt to fulfill important social and psychological needs, we see that delinquency can be the result of an attempt to feel engaged and connected. This study combined self-determination theory and past control theories of delinquency. As such, it provides the starting point for understanding delinquency not as a youth's failure to adapt, but as his or her last attempt to succeed.

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Appendix A

Examples of coded interview responses by domain: Themes, repeating ideas, quotes.

SDT Domain	Themes	Most Frequent Repeating Ideas	Key Quotes
Autonomy	<p>Desire freedom/trust to make choices in school</p> <p>Desire to be able to move forward at own pace in school</p> <p>Being with friends allows a sense of autonomy</p> <p>Self-expression is important and often stifled</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Want freedom to make decisions ♦ More leniency leads to better rule following ♦ Having a say makes him feel important ♦ Not being able to move forward 	<p>"I like [the alternative school] a lot better than the regular schools because we have more freedom. ... we don't get in trouble as much there. I like it a whole lot better."</p> <p>"I hate being told what to do all the time."</p>
Relatedness	<p>No support in the classroom</p> <p>Teachers who do not relate to or communicate with kids</p> <p>Desire for more caring teachers</p> <p>Dearth of positive influences at school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Lack of help/support in classroom ♦ Bad communication with teachers ♦ Teachers who can't or don't relate to kids ♦ Teachers that care [here] make a huge difference 	<p>"I would say for more of our teachers to be able to communicate with us better or understand us better. Cause I mean like we have teachers that understand us good but it's a handful of them like... There should be more people like that and it frustrates me when there's not."</p>
Competence	<p>Being engaged in classes keeps students focused, interested</p> <p>Having a skill that one feels good about is meaningful</p> <p>Not being challenged leads to disengagement and disinterest in school</p> <p>Doing poorly and not getting help is frustrating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Being engaged is important ♦ Hands-on work is important to keep engaged ♦ Feels that work in school is irrelevant to future ♦ Can name a skill that they're good at, makes them feel good ♦ Success in something feels good ♦ Not being challenged is frustrating ♦ School is boring ♦ No being able to move forward 	<p>"Basically when you get your level three, when you get your week, it makes you feel good. Like for me, it's like I feel good when I'm doing good."</p> <p>"I would put myself down because I'm used to teachers putting me down."</p> <p>"No I never did [my work] because it was too much, I just gave up."</p>

