



The Relationship between Social Capital and Criminal Inclination (Case Study of Iranian Youth)

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Abstract: The present study attempts to explore effects of norms, trust, and social networks on criminal tendencies among youth in Isfahan. Social norms may give criminals a sense of shame, thereby increasing costs for committing crimes. Similarly, social networks can reduce delinquency through increasing likelihood of crime detection. In addition, social trust lowers level of criminal inclination by facilitating and reinforcing social interactions among individuals. The present study aims to examine the links between social capital and criminal inclination among youth in Isfahan. We found a significant relationship between social capital and criminal inclination in youth. Random sampling was employed to survey 354 young individuals in Isfahan by making use of questionnaires. Hypotheses were tested using SPSS 16. We considered three dimensions (social norms, social trust, and social networks) for social capital and three dimensions (criminal offense, civil offense, and disciplinary offense) for criminal inclination, and found a significant relationship between social capital and criminal inclination.

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1. Introduction

Since 1960, theoretical and experimental factors contributing to criminal inclination have been examined through economic literature and rational choice approach. Advocates of this approach argued that a crime is committed based on the offender's evaluation of costs and benefits of that crime. Therefore, literature in this area emphasized roles played by police and legal system in preventing crimes. Recently, however, effects of social interactions on committing crimes have been widely discussed. Many scholars believe that one area inadequately addressed by studies is the links between crime and social capital. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by exploring impacts of different dimensions of social capital, e.g. social norms, social trust, and social networks, on criminal inclination among youth in Isfahan. The study particularly aims to measure levels of social capital of respondents, to assess criminal inclination and its different dimensions in respondents, and finally, to evaluate connections between social capital and criminal inclination in respondents.

2. Social Capital

During the past two decades, social capital emerged as a concept broadly used by sociologists. Social capital was developed along with such other concepts as human capital, cultural capital, and

economic capital. James Coleman, a pioneer in this area, defines social capital in terms of its functions. In his belief, social capital is not a single isolated element; rather it consists of variety of entities with two elements in common: (1) they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors; (2) like other types of capital, social capital is productive and facilitates achievements of goals which are not attainable in the absence of such capital. In Coleman's conception, social capital is ethically and normally a neutral resource; that is, it is neither desirable nor undesirable. It merely provides resources to facilitate actions (Coleman 1988: 95-102). On the other hand, like Coleman, Robert Putnam focuses on functional nature of social capital. In his view, social capital is a set of inclinations, relations, and values that govern individuals' actions. On one hand, trust among individuals, networks, and social institutions influence functions of society, and on the other hand, environment and social conditions shape actions and change their directions. Higher levels of cooperation among individuals increase social capital (Putnam 1995: 67).

Apparently, the concept of social capital has been used and interpreted in different ways by authors. Social capital may be divided into two major elements: relationships and resources. Different authors have shown different levels of interest in

each element (McCarthy *et al*, 2002). In addition, researchers' approaches to social capital vary depending on their emphasis on the role played by social environment. Coleman (1988) emphasizes the role of family and school while Putnam (1995) focuses on socio-political participation, although he acknowledges the role of family. Due to lack of consensus on definition of social capital, the connection between different dimensions of social capital and theoretical definitions of this concept poses a problematic issue (Paxton 1999). Controversies continue to exist on significance of resources, functions, and different outcomes of social capital.

Another problem with social capital is connected to how it is perceived as either a collective or individual resource. Many political scholars view social capital as a collective resource (Putnam 1995: 67) while Brehm and Rahn (1997) believe that social capital acts as an individual asset. McCarthy *et al* (2002) state that unlike other commodities, social capital is not of an individual nature; rather, it rises as a result of interactions and relationships among individuals. In general, many authors agree on collective and individual benefits of social relations. Therefore, social capital as an individual and collective resource is recognized by almost all authors (Paxton, 1999).

It should be noted that the concept of social capital is not positive in itself. The available literature on social capital often emphasized on its positive aspects. However, negative outcomes have been reported as well: social capital can deny outgroups of their social opportunities or may limit individual freedom. Thus, some members of ingroups with strong social capitals may act against the interests of other groups (Paxton, 1999). In summary, social capital can be thought of as neither a positive nor a negative factor since its outcomes entirely depend on the individual uses to which it is put.

As the concept of social capital is increasingly being used in different areas more critical views are emerging in connection to the concept. The presence of a wide range of definitions for social capital has resulted in a methodological and theoretical chaos (Portes 1998) Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) argue that the notion of social capital has been overdeveloped. They suggest that it is time to dissect the concept into several major parts including social bonds, social control, and social usefulness. Portes (1988: 21) believes that social capital as a new phenomenon is a set of variety of entities formerly studied under various headings. On the other hand, he confirms the concept since, in his view, it encompasses real important aspects of life. Kilpatrick *et al* (2003) argue that the concept of social capital

has been used in different ways by authors, policymakers, and thinkers of various disciplines. Therefore, the specialization trend in different sciences has limited abilities of social capital as an analytical tool in social science.

3. The Connection between Social Capital and Crimes

In general, there are two major views on impact of social capital on reducing crime, both emphasizing empathy among members of society. The first view assumes that social capital increases the costs of committing social offenses, thereby making individuals amicably resolve their interpersonal disputes (*e.g.* disputes arising among family members, neighbors, and coworkers) as well as disputes at social level (*e.g.* uneven distribution of economic opportunities). This view seems to be entirely consistent with Fukuyama's views (1995:90). He argues that social capital can reduce what economists call costs of actions – costs of negotiations, implementing instructions, and the like – and make economic entities more efficient. In other words, as social capital builds up, each individual defines his or her welfare in connection to welfare of other members of society and this reduces costs of actions (Fukuyama, 1997: 5). The second view holds that social capital influences social bonds and strengthens organizing of individuals, thereby mitigating issues in collective actions. This hinders opportunistic behaviors and alleviates social conflicts and disputes. Glaeser and Sacerdote (1999) argue that felony is a major issue in large cities; since members of such society can reinforce their connections and interactions to other members through their permanent residence in particular social environment.

Rosenfeld, Messner, and Baumer (1999) proposed a different view. They indicate how theories of social disorganization, anomie, and pressure establish a negative relationship between social capital and criminal acts. As mentioned earlier, social disorganization theories show that poor social control compromises abilities of groups in organization and this, in turn, brings feelings of insecurity and distrust to society, preparing the ground for violence and criminal acts (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). Moreover, by emphasizing individualistic behaviors and deteriorating moral principles in society, anomie theory indicates that members of such societies tend to take advantage of others; growing mistrust in this situation gives rise to crimes (Rosenfeld and Messner 1998). Finally, according to social pressure theory, lack of social capital can be regarded as a form of resource insufficiency that will prevent members of society

from reaching their public goals (Land, McCall, and Cohen, 1990).

Yet another view argues that social capital may lead to more violent crimes. In this view, dense social interactions encourage participation in criminal acts by facilitating exchange of information and reducing costs of committing crimes. In addition, deep connections among members of a group may increase the likelihood of successful acts of crimes. According to Glaeser, Sacerdote, and Scheinkman (1996) strong social interactions among members of criminal groups is the main reason of criminal acts in large urban areas. Further, Rubio (1997) analyzed the role played by drug cartels, militias, and rabbles in generating negative social capital in Colombia. He argues that such groups extend negative social capital by restricting behavioral models for youth or by training them for employing force and violence in society.

These mixed impacts of social capital on committing crime can result in theoretical chaos. The study argues that when created based on participation on the part of all members of society, social capital will have a useful mitigating effect on criminal acts. In other words, in this view, society is regarded as a whole in which the resultant behavior of all individuals can resolve social problems and prevent extension of crimes. In contrast, when concentrated in particular groups such as outlaws, ethnicity groups, or group of close neighbors, social capital will become limited to these groups and give rise to violence and crimes. Harmony and improved intragroup connections can lead to inter-group tensions, compromise the ability of groups in reaching agreements, and eventually increase the level of criminal actions in society. In the same vein, Durlauf (1999) believes that negative social capital may reinforce ingroup connections by strengthening group identity – which, in turn, gives rise to intergroup hostility. An important notion in this regard is the concept of polarization. Esteban and Ray (1994) argue that polarization at social level can result in riot, civil violence, social tension, and even violent crimes.

The connections between crime and social capital seem to be more complicated than what has been proposed by these two views. On one hand, committing a crime can reduce social capital by lowering the level of social trust, and on the other hand, it can improve social capital by encouraging formation of organizations and voluntary societies to prevent crimes. Moser and Shrader argue that crimes erode social capital in different ways. Delinquency, one on hand, inhibits participation and formation of social networks while, on the other hand, it has negative impact on education and even healthcare

services. They believe that the lower is the level of criminal acts in a society the higher will be participation, and in contrast, as level of crimes increases participation drops (Moser and Shrader, 1998, 9).

In summary, individuals who merely seek their own interests will be better off by committing crimes and reaching their goals. In other words, lack of moral or disciplinary measures in disorganized societies allows individuals to seek their interests by violating laws and committing crimes. Crime levels are also high in societies where alternative resources of income (that are associated with physical, social, and human resources) required to achieve goals are insufficient. Sociological theories argue that low level of social trust and civil norms and limited social networks is a factor contributing to poor moral foundations and high levels of crime.

4. Literature Review

In general, different theories of social capital have received limited attention from criminology studies. However, even this limited number of studies provides significant findings on the link between social capital, crime, violation of law, and delinquency. Salmi and Kivivouri (2006) examined the connection between social capital and criminal acts among youth by controlling for structural and personal factors. Their findings indicate that criminal behavior is aggravated among youth when levels of parent support, social control, and social trust are lowered.

Wright *et al* (2001) drew on Coleman's view to explore the link between family social capital and criminal behavior. The age of individuals covered by their study ranged from 11 to 24. Their findings suggest that social capital in family reduces the level of criminal act in youth and mitigates their misbehavior. In the same vein, McNeal (1999) studied the impact of social capital on school students. He found that social capital of family is a determinant factor in proper behaviors by students. He also observed a positive relationship between socio-economic status and having a healthy family. McNeal argues that even in the absence of sufficient resources in networks, social bonds still can bring stability to behaviors of individuals.

In their study on the link between social capital and violent behavior in adolescent students of high schools, Wright and Fitzpatrick (2006) used cross-sectional data gathered by longitudinal studies on adolescence health to evaluate the connection between family, school, neighborhood, and violent behavior through multivariate models. They found that social capital is a significant resource mitigating

consequences of violence, particularly in parent-children relationships and attachment to school.

In their study, Wright, Cullen, and Miller (2001) argue that family social capital generates different forms of social and individual resources referred to by Coleman. Such resources can, over time, reduce delinquency involvement, mitigate negative impacts of misbehavior, and have positive effect on life path. They also found that lack of social capital for youth can result in anti-social behaviors.

Gatti *et al* (2003: 22) studied the relationship between civility and deviation among youth in different regions of Italy. They regard civility as a social trait which consists of such characteristics as socio-political commitment, social bonds, and integrity. Although not highly significant, but their findings suggest that high levels of civil commitment can facilitate social consolidation of youth, thereby preventing crimes. They emphasize protective aspects of social commitment and link such aspects to social control theories.

Thornberry (1987) examined the interaction between delinquent behaviors and the contributing social factors. He argues that poor social norms can result in criminal behavior which, in future, can dilute social bonds.

Other findings show that diminished social norm may lead to rejection of children by parents (Cole and Zahn-Waxler, 1992) or rejection of parents by children (Kumpler and Demarsh, 2986). Hagan (1993) argues that individuals, with low levels of human and social capital, who engage in criminal acts will probably not be able to assume social roles in future. Findings by Hartwell (2002) indicate that involvement in delinquent behaviors on the part of youth reduce their opportunities in life. Other studies show that crimes are often committed in environments where social capital is inadequate and therefore, cannot mediate interpersonal relationships (Sampson and Laub, 1994).

In Iran, Aliverdina *et al* (2008) employed Coleman's theory of family social capital and Hirschi's social bond theory to experimentally examine the connection between family social capital and delinquency involvement in teenage boys and girls. They studied a sample consisting of 410

individuals in Sanandaj and divided social capital into cognitive and structural capitals to show that cognitive social capital in families of male respondents was the most determinant factor in delinquency involvement while for female respondents structural social capital in family is a better predictor of delinquency involvement. In addition, Chalbi and Mobaraki (2005) examined impacts of social capital on criminal behavior at micro and macro levels and found a negative significant relationship between social capital and committing crime at both levels.

5. Research Hypotheses

Primary hypothesis: There is connection between social capital and level of criminal acts.

Secondary Hypotheses:

1. The higher is the social trust level in an individual, the more inclined he or she will be to commit crime.
2. The more limited are interactions between an individual and others, the more inclined he or she will be to commit crime.
3. The higher is the level of anomie in an individual, the more inclined he or she will be to commit crime.

6. Methodology

With regard to control conditions, the present study is survey. Statistical population of this applied study consists of all citizens of Isfahan aging from 18 to 30. The sample size is 354 determined using Kukran formula with the accuracy $d=0.05$, maximum variance $0.25 s^2$ ($s^2=pq$), and a confidence level of 95%.

7. Findings

Table I: Mean value and standard deviation for respondents' scores on different dimensions of social capital and criminal inclination

Table I shows mean and standard deviation for respondents' scores on dimensions of social capital and criminal inclination. Mean value for total inclination is 64.24 and standard deviation is 10.29. These values for total social capital are 59.38 and 6.30, respectively.

Table I: Correlations between dimensions of social capital and dimensions of criminal inclination

Variable	Criminal offense	Civil offense	Disciplinary offense	Offenses (total)
Social trust	0.42**	0.35**	0.27**	0.407**
Social networks	0.39**	0.24**	0.19**	0.22**
Social norms	0.51**	0.40**	0.31**	0.43**
Social capital (total)	0.48**	0.29**	0.23**	0.392**

** significant at $P<0.01$

Table II provides Pearson coefficients for correlations among dimensions of social capital and dimensions of criminal inclination. As seen in the table, all coefficients are significant at $P < 0.01$. The highest correlation was observed between social norms and criminal offense ($r = 0.51$, $P < 0.01$) while the weakest correlation was found between social networks and disciplinary offense ($r = 0.91$, $P < 0.01$). The coefficient of correlation between total criminal inclination and total social capital is $r = 0.39$.

Regression analysis was used to determine multiple relationships between social capital and various dimensions of criminal inclination. Table IV presents the results obtained through the regression model for each of these dimensions.

Table III: Results of regression model for relationship between social capital and dimensions of criminal inclination

Predictor	Criterion variable	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard error ΔR	F	Significance level
Dimensions of social capital	Criminal offense	0.51	0.26	0.24	0.87	73.20	0.001
	Civil offense	0.34	0.11	0.11	0.21	52.81	0.001
	Disciplinary offense	0.28	0.07	0.08	1.04	21.47	0.001
Dimensions of social capital	Total offense	0.40	0.16	0.16	0.79	65.19	0.001

As seen in Table III, dimensions of social capital are good predictors of components of criminal inclination. R value for correlation between social capital and attitude toward criminal offense is 0.51 and the value obtained for coefficient of determination (26%) shows how well dimensions of social capital are able to determine variations in criminal offense. R value for correlation between social capital and civil offense is 0.34 and the value obtained for coefficient of determination (11%) shows how well dimensions of social capital are able to determine variations in civil offense. R value for correlation between social capital and disciplinary offense is 0.28 and the value obtained for coefficient of determination (7%) shows how well dimensions of social capital are able to determine variations in disciplinary offense. R value for correlation between social capital and total offense is 0.40 and the value obtained for coefficient of determination (16%) shows how well dimensions of social capital are able to determine variations in total offense. Significance value found for F indicate that all coefficients are significant at $P < 0.05$.

Table IV: Non-standardized (B) and standardized (b) regression coefficients for dimensions of social capital and components of criminal inclination

Criterion	Predictor	Non-standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t	Significance level
		B	Standard error	b		
Criminal offense	Social trust	-0.43	0.069	-0.49	-6.59	0.001
	Social networks	-0.31	0.071	-0.24	-4.98	0.001
	Social norms	-0.51	0.039	-0.53	-7.21	0.001
	Total social capital	-0.42	0.052	-0.44	-5.53	0.001
Civil offense	Social trust	-0.36	0.038	-0.40	-5.15	0.001
	Social networks	-0.22	0.047	-0.27	-3.78	0.001
	Social norms	-0.405	0.043	-0.38	-5.42	0.001
Disciplinary offense	Total social capital	-0.316	0.087	0.33	-5.01	0.001
	Social trust	-0.29	0.45	0.37	-4.51	0.001
	Social networks	-0.18	0.070	-0.09	-3.89	0.001
	Social norms	-0.35	0.061	-0.32	-2.67	0.001
	Total social capital	-0.26	0.054	-0.245	-4.63	0.001

Table IV presents Non-standardized (B) and standardized (b) regression coefficients for dimensions of social capital and components of criminal inclination. As seen in the table, among all dimensions of criminal inclination, criminal offense is the most important component with the largest weight (b). In summary, the relationship between social capital and dimensions of criminal inclination is significant at $P < 0.05$. All regression coefficients are negative and significant showing a negative relationship social capital and dimensions of criminal inclination ($P < 0.05$). In general, all dimensions of criminal inclination are negatively influenced by social norms while the smallest negative influence on these dimensions comes from social networks. As seen in the table, total social capital has the largest negative impact on criminal offense ($b = -0.44$, $P < 0.05$).

8. Conclusion

As mentioned in the review section on experimental and theoretical literature, social deviation is major issue which is connected to social relations and social bonds in each society; thus, to reinforce social capital in society proper planning is required in different social institutions such as family, school, university, community, *etc.* Crimes and deviations can be mitigated by strengthening social bonds and providing a healthy environment. In the following section, study variables are analyzed to determine the contribution made by each variable in reducing criminal inclination, and eventually, to evaluate their role in creating a safe society.

As seen in the findings, analysis of the two main variables of this study, namely social capital and criminal inclination, revealed a significant relationship between these variables within the statistical population – a sample of young persons in Isfahan. The primary objective was to determine whether or not a relationship exists between social capital and criminal inclination among youth. Our findings showed that although “criminal offense”, as a component of criminal inclination, is a more significant predictor, however, summing up all results, the relationship between all dimensions of social capital and all dimensions of criminal inclination is a negative one.

As shown in the results, social norms appear to have the largest impact on criminal inclination. Some attributed delinquency involvement to natural environment factors, while other believe that it is attributable to genetic and ethnic factors; still others suggest that criminal inclinations stem from inadequate education and poor culture. Without neglecting the abovementioned factors, sociology

focuses on quality and nature of social relations as determinant factor in abnormal behaviors. In this view, criminal behaviors become prevalent when social values and norms are questioned. Therefore, criminal inclination is caused by social anomy. If social environment establishes a balanced link between demands and resources and between means and ends and employs social culture to serve this end, individual behaviors will be directed toward realization of demands of social system and individuals as well. However, if social environment and its internal structure create economic, political, and social inequalities and fan the flames of dissatisfactions with existing social norms and values, then individuals will be inclined to deviation and criminal behaviors.

Social trust is another variable which is in direct relationship with criminal inclination among youth. String social bonds and mutual trust have considerable effects on the health of society. It should be noted, however, such relations must be based on trust and sincerity because only this kind of relationship can increase social capital- which is largely reflected in participation in social networks- and reduce criminal behaviors. On the other hand, building up mutual trust together with proper education for improving communication skills and socialization of individuals play a fundamental role in reducing crime and conflicts in society since such social conflicts may deteriorate mutual trust and interactions, thereby preparing the ground for criminal behaviors.

Finally, our findings indicate a direct relationship between social networks and criminal inclination. Individuals with lower levels of engagement in social, economic, and cultural activities in society and experience poor bonds with others are more likely to get involved in criminal activities. Perhaps, this is attributable to the fact that anti-social behaviors roots in poor rearing and personality development. The disorder is reflected in behavior and character of individuals and leads to lack of any moderation in terms of affections and psychological features. These individuals lack any sense of duty, conscientiousness, and moral fiber and rarely think of anything but their desires. Their behaviors are impulsive without creating any sense of guilt or shame.

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1/7/2022