

# Chapter 1

## Religious Participation and Criminal Behavior

Byron R. Johnson

**Abstract** This chapter examines and summarizes the current state of our knowledge regarding the relationship between religious participation and criminal behavior, especially in regard to crime reduction, offender rehabilitation, and offender aftercare. Aided by multiple systematic reviews of the relevant research literature, this chapter confirms that religious participation influences the behavior of many people in multiple settings such as family, peers, and school. The overwhelming majority of studies reviewed document the importance of religious participation in protecting individuals from harmful outcomes as well as promoting beneficial and prosocial outcomes. As policy makers consider strategies to reduce delinquency, gang violence, crime, and prisoner reentry, it is essential to seriously and intentionally consider the role religious institutions and religious practices are willing to play in implementing, developing, and sustaining multifaceted approaches to crime reduction. From after-school programs for disadvantaged youth to public/private partnerships that bring together secular and sacred groups to address problems like prisoner reentry, it is increasingly apparent that any crime-fighting strategy will be needlessly incomplete unless communities of faith and their vast networks of social and spiritual support are integrally involved.

There is no shortage of academic scholarship addressing the various dimensions and consequences of crime and delinquency. Crime has always been considered an important topic that is closely monitored and debated by government officials, decision-makers, and politicians alike. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the latest trends in criminal activity as well as efforts to control crime remain a top priority for scholars and the public at large. At the same time, evidenced-based approaches to crime have gained wide support in recent years even among political adversaries. Thus, increasing importance is attached to scientific evaluations and

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ongoing research of best practices in confronting social problems like crime, gang violence, teen drug abuse, or post-release recidivism rates for former prisoners.

In a similar vein, there is no shortage of research on the topics of religion, spirituality, religious practices, and belief.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the many historical, theological, or philosophical studies of religion, in recent years there has been a great deal of interest in the role of religious institutions and faith-based organizations to confront social ills and in the provision of social services to those residing in communities of disadvantage. From studies of social capital to spiritual capital, scholars are studying how religion may be linked, if at all, to civic engagement, volunteerism, prosocial behavior, and crime reduction.

In light of the fact that crime and religion receive so much independent attention from the academic community as well as the popular media, it is intriguing we do not have an extensive or well-developed research literature that addresses the relationship between religion and crime. This is unfortunate, since a close examination of the extant literature reveals that the religiosity–crime relationship is robust and carries with it considerable implications at both the theoretical and public policy levels.

In order to better understand the past, present, and future role of religious participation in addressing matters related to crime, delinquency, offender treatment, rehabilitation programs, and even the transition of prisoners back to society, this chapter reviews the existing literature in a systematic fashion in order to assess the possible benefit or harm that religious influences may bring to each of these important areas. This chapter, therefore, examines and summarizes the current state of our knowledge regarding the relationship between religious participation and criminal behavior as well as discussing how religious participation matters in crime reduction, offender rehabilitation, and offender aftercare.

## 1.1 Religious Interventions and Crime Reduction: A Review of the Literature

Although case studies are not considered to be very scientific or objective, I include several of the more rigorous case studies that examined specific elements of religious interventions designed to reduce crime or transform offenders. Of particular note are three publications by Harvard University researchers Christopher Winship and Jenny Berrien documenting the role played by African–American congregations and religious mediators in the subsequent youth violence reduction in the late 1990s (see Berrien et al. 2000; Berrien and Winship 2003; Winship and Berrien 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Though most of this research quite naturally focuses on samples of Christian populations, it does not mean that other religions are irrelevant to these discussions. Indeed, in years to come it is hoped that we will begin to compare and contrast the relative efficacy of interventions from different religious groups, traditions, or faith communities. However, the current chapter largely focuses on the extant research which happens to be based largely on Christian samples.

This dramatic drop in youth homicides was featured prominently in news and policy outlets and was popularly referred to as the “Boston Miracle.”<sup>2</sup>

Descriptive studies carry more weight than case studies, but still tend to suffer a number of methodological shortcomings that prevent them from being taken as seriously by scholars and policy makers alike. Generally speaking, descriptive studies should not be overlooked, but their findings should be interpreted with caution. Several descriptive studies have examined the effectiveness of faith-based programs in working with offenders both inside and outside prison. Teen Challenge, the country’s largest faith-based drug treatment program, was founded over 50 years ago by Rev. David Wilkerson and would become the subject of a motion picture *The Cross and the Switchblade*.<sup>3</sup> In one of the first studies of any faith-based intervention, researchers found that those who graduated from the Teen Challenge program showed significant and positive behavioral change when compared with other groups over a 7-year period (Hess 1976).

Several other descriptive studies focused upon faith-based programs designed for prisoners and former prisoners. One study compared former inmates who had participated in Prison Fellowship, a faith-based organization that attempts to assist prisoners and former prisoners through an extensive network of church-based volunteers, with a matched sample of former prisoners who did not participate in the church-based program. Former prisoners in the church-based program were less likely to return to prison (O’Connor 2001). A similar study examined prisoners who had participated in Kairos Horizons, a faith-based prison program in Florida. The Florida Department of Corrections (2000) reports that Kairos participants were less likely to have disciplinary problems and more likely to attain higher literacy levels. Several years later an impact evaluation was conducted to determine the effects of the Kairos Horizon program on participants and their families. Results indicated that Kairos Horizon program participants had significantly lower rates of disciplinary infractions and had a longer period of time until their first arrest following release from prison (Hercik 2004a, b).

Multivariate studies represent the strongest set of studies reviewed. They typically include research designs that allow researchers to control for a number of factors and thus rule out other explanations for results. In the vast majority of multivariate studies reviewed, the faith-based program or initiative under study was found to be significantly more effective than its counterpart. An exception is a study that examined how participation in religious programs and the experience of being “born again” were associated with lowered recidivism. The study found no difference between religious prisoners and nonreligious prisoners in terms of recidivism (Johnson 1987).

In a comparative evaluation of the Christian drug treatment program Teen Challenge, Aaron Bicknese assessed the effectiveness of Teen Challenge according

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<sup>2</sup>For popular coverage of the “Boston Miracle”, see, for example, *Newsweek* cover story, “God vs. Gangs: What’s the Hottest Idea In Crime Prevention? The Power of Religion,” June 1, 1998.

<sup>3</sup>The 1970 movie that starred Pat Boone as Rev. David Wilkerson and Erik Estrada as former gang member Nicky Cruz was based on the 1962 best-selling book by the same name.

to several outcome measures and found that offenders participating in the faith-based drug treatment program were more likely to remain sober and maintain employment than those that did not. Further, Teen Challenge graduates were employed full time and fewer Teen Challenge graduates returned to treatment than those in either comparison group (Bicknese 1999).

A series of multivariate studies examining the effectiveness of Prison Fellowship (PF) programs tend to support the notion that PF participants fare significantly better. In the first study, Mark Young and his coauthors investigated long-term recidivism among a group of federal inmates trained as volunteer prison ministers and found that the PF group had a significantly lower rate of recidivism than the matched group (Young et al. 1995). In the second study, Johnson and colleagues examined the impact of PF religious programs on institutional adjustment and recidivism rates in two matched groups of inmates from four adult male prisons in New York State. After controlling for level of involvement in PF-sponsored programs, inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be rearrested during the one-year follow-up period (Johnson et al. 1997). In a follow-up to this study, Johnson extended the New York research on former inmates by increasing the length of study from 1 to 8 years and found that high Bible study participants were less likely to be rearrested at 2 and 3 years post-release (Johnson 2004).

In one of the more publicized studies to date, Johnson completed a 6-year evaluation of Prison Fellowship's InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), an expressly Christian, faith-based prerelease program. Among the study's key findings are the following: (1) IFI program graduates were significantly less likely than the matched comparison group to be arrested and (2) IFI program graduates were significantly less likely than the matched comparison group to be re-incarcerated during the 2-year follow-up period (Johnson and Larson 2003).

In yet another study of Prison Fellowship, Kerley and associates explored the relationship between participation in a faith-based prison event, Operation Starting Line (OSL), and subsequent experience of negative emotions and incidence of negative behaviors (Kerley et al. 2005a). OSL participants were less likely to experience negative emotions and to engage in fights and arguments with other inmates as well as prison staff. The results from this study are consistent with previous research and were supported in a second study where Kerley surveyed prisoners in order to determine whether levels of reported religiosity were associated with reduced levels of arguing and fighting. The study concludes that religiosity directly reduces the likelihood of arguing and indirectly reduces the likelihood of fighting (Kerley et al. 2005b).

The Iowa Department of Management conducted an evaluation of all 17 substance abuse treatment programs found in eight of Iowa's prisons, including Prison Fellowship's InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI). Among other things, the lengthy evaluation concludes that IFI was the first or second most effective of the 17 substance abuse interventions to reduce recidivism in the state of Iowa (Iowa Department of Management 2007).

More recently, Duwe and King (2012) published a study that evaluated the effectiveness of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (InnerChange), a faith-based prisoner reentry program in Minnesota, by examining recidivism outcomes among 732

offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2009. A series of regression analyses reveal that participation in InnerChange significantly reduced reoffending (rearrest, reconviction, and new offense re-incarceration) of former prisoners. Because the program relies heavily on volunteers and program costs are privately funded, the authors conclude that the program may be especially advantageous from a cost–benefit perspective. In sum, there is a small but growing research literature suggesting that religious interventions (e.g., Bible studies, faith-based drug treatment, faith-based dorms in prisons, and faith-based prisoner reentry programs) can be effective in reducing the likelihood of rearrest or re-incarceration.

## 1.2 Religious Participation and Criminal Behavior: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Contemporary research on the religion–crime nexus can be traced to Hirschi and Starks’s classic “Hellfire and Delinquency” study (Hirschi and Stark 1969). Hirschi and Stark surprised many when they discovered that no relationship existed between levels of religious commitment and measures of delinquency among youth. Replications of this study both supported (Burkett and White 1974) and refuted (Albrecht et al. 1977; Higgins and Albrecht 1977; Jensen and Erickson 1979) Hirschi and Stark’s original finding. Stark and colleagues would later suggest that these opposing findings were the result of the moral makeup of the community being studied. Stark et al. (1982) proposed that areas with high church membership and attendance rates represented “moral communities,” while areas with low church membership typified “secularized communities.” Stark’s moral communities hypothesis, therefore, predicted an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency in moral communities as well as the expectation that there will be little or no effect of religiosity on individuals in secularized communities. This theoretical perspective provided an important framework for understanding why some studies of delinquency had yielded an inverse relationship between religious commitment measures and delinquency, while other studies failed to generate the inverse relationship (Stark 1996; Stark et al. 1982).

Stark’s moral communities, however, represents just one of a number of different theoretical orientations informing research at the nexus of religion and crime. Social control and social disorganization are two different theoretical perspectives that have proven fruitful in examining the relationship between religiosity and crime. For example, using social disorganization as a theoretical backdrop, empirical evidence confirms that the effects of religiosity in reducing crime remain significant even in communities typified by decay, poverty, disadvantage, and disorganization (Freeman 1986; Jang and Johnson 2001; Johnson et al. 2001, 2000a). Moreover, I and my associates (Johnson et al. 2000a) found that individual religiosity helped at-risk youths such as those living in poor inner-city areas (i.e., Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia) to escape from drug use and other illegal activities. Further, results from a series of multilevel analyses indicate that church attendance (the frequency

of attending religious services) has significant inverse effects on illegal activities, drug use, and drug selling among disadvantaged youths (Johnson et al. 2000a).

There is also increasing evidence that religious involvement may lower the risks of a broad range of delinquent behaviors, including both minor and serious forms of criminal behavior (Evans et al. 1996). Aided by several systematic reviews of this literature (Baier and Wright 2001; Johnson et al. 2000c, 2002), it has become increasingly clear that the relevant literature may not be inconclusive as some scholars continue to assert. In a meta-analysis of 40 studies that focus on the relationship between religion and delinquency, Johnson et al. (2000b) found that most of these studies reported an inverse relationship between measures of religiosity and delinquency. Several studies found no relationship or were inconclusive and only one found a positive link between greater religiosity and increasing delinquency. Interestingly, it was found that among those studies with the most sophisticated research design, there was stronger likelihood that increasing religiosity is linked to decreases in delinquency. Conversely, those studies reporting inconclusive results tended to be less methodologically rigorous. In a second meta-analysis, Baier and Wright (2001) review 60 studies within the religiosity–delinquency literature and reach much the same conclusion as the previous study by Johnson et al. (2000b). They find that studies using larger and more representative datasets are more likely to find significant inverse effects (i.e., increasing religiosity and decreasing delinquency) than studies that utilize smaller, regional, or convenient samples. In a third systematic review (Johnson et al. 2002), we examined religion and multiple outcome areas including several that are relevant for our current discussion (i.e., alcohol abuse, drug use/abuse, and crime/delinquency). Among the 97 alcohol studies reviewed, only two studies found religiosity to be associated with deleterious outcomes. Another ten studies reported inconclusive findings, while 85 studies found an inverse relationship, indicating that increasing religiosity was associated with a lowered likelihood of alcohol abuse. We also found a similar pattern among the 54 studies reviewed examining drug use or abuse. Fifty of the 54 studies found increasing religiousness linked to decreasing drug use or abuse, while only one study found a positive relationship. Finally, we reviewed another 46 studies within the crime and delinquency literature that examine the influence of religion and the same trend is obvious—increasing religiosity is associated with lowered likelihood of criminal or delinquent behavior (37 studies), while religiosity is positively related to delinquency in only one study.

In sum, these systematic reviews and meta-analyses confirm that consistent and mounting evidence suggests heightened religious commitment or participation helps protect youth from delinquent behavior and deviant activities. Simply stated, these reviews or meta-analyses document that increasing religiosity is associated with a lowered likelihood of committing delinquent or criminal acts. But are these research findings consistent with the more recent research literature on religion and crime? In order to answer this question, I report findings from a more systematic review of the relevant research literature on religion and crime.

This comprehensive review covers studies published between 1944 and 2010, with a majority of these published over the last several decades (Johnson 2011).

In this systematic review, I examine the type of study (e.g., cross-sectional, prospective cohort, retrospective, clinical trial, experimental, case control, descriptive, case report, or qualitative), the sampling method (e.g., random, probability, systematic sampling, convenience/purposive sample), the number of subjects in the sample, population (e.g., children, adolescents, high school students, college students, community-dwelling adults, elderly, church members, religious or clergy, gender, and race), location, religious variables included in the analysis (e.g., religious attendance, scripture study, subjective religiosity, religious commitment, intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, etc.), controls, and findings (e.g., no association, mixed evidence, beneficial association with outcome, or harmful association with outcome).

In total, 109 studies were reviewed and the results of this current review confirm that a majority of these studies report a significant inverse relationship between measures of religious commitment or participation and various crime and delinquency measures or outcomes. Approximately 89 % of the studies (97/109) find an inverse or beneficial relationship between religion and some measure of crime or delinquency (i.e., increasing religiosity is associated with lower crime/delinquency). Only 11 studies found no association or reported mixed findings, and only one study from this exhaustive literature review found that religion was associated with a harmful outcome (Johnson 2011).

Researchers over the last several decades have made steady contributions to this emerging religiosity–crime literature, and yet, until recently, there was a lack of consensus about the nature of this relationship between religion and crime. Stated differently, in studies utilizing vastly different methods, samples, and research designs, increasing religiosity (religiousness, religious activities, or participation) is consistently linked with decreases in various measures of crime or delinquency. These findings are particularly pronounced among the more methodologically and statistically sophisticated studies that rely upon nationally representative samples (Johnson and Jang 2010). Religion is a robust variable that tends to be associated with the lowered likelihood of crime or delinquency or recidivism and as such should no longer be overlooked by criminologists or social scientists. In fact, failure to consider religion variables will cause researchers to be needlessly shortsighted in estimating models designed to explain its direct and indirect influences on crime and delinquency.

### **1.3 How Religion Matters: Protective Factors and Prosocial Behavior**

The current systematic review of the research literature provides clear and compelling empirical evidence that religious commitment is linked with crime and delinquency reduction.<sup>4</sup> In short, the data consistently confirm that religion matters in

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<sup>4</sup>For a systematic review of the research literature documenting the protective role of religion in depression, suicide, mortality, promiscuous sex, alcohol abuse, and drug use/abuse, see H. Koenig

beneficial ways, but researchers have spent far less time considering how or why measures of religion, religious institutions, or religiosity are inversely linked to crime and delinquency. In this section I turn my attention to consideration of this often overlooked subject of how and why religion matters in reducing crime and delinquency.

### ***1.3.1 Linking Religion to Protective Factors***

There is growing evidence that religion, individual religious commitment, or religious congregations have the potential to help prevent high-risk urban youths from engaging in delinquent behavior (Johnson et al. 2001, 2000a). For instance, I and my colleagues (Johnson et al. 2000a) estimated a series of regression models and found that (1) the effects of neighborhood disorder (i.e., high-crime neighborhoods) on crime were partly mediated by an individual's frequency of church attendance and (2) involvement of African-American youth in religious institutions significantly buffered the effects of neighborhood disorder on crime and, in particular, serious crime. We concluded that the African-American Church is an important agency of local social control and researchers should not overlook the important role these religious congregations may play in the lives of disadvantaged youth.

Preliminary evidence suggests that youth who have continued religious involvement or participation throughout adolescent may be the beneficiary of a cumulative religiosity effect that lessens the risk of illicit drug use (Jang and Johnson 2001). Ulmer et al. (2012), using data from the Add Health Survey, found the primary effect of youth religious participation on marijuana use was to prevent its initiation in the first place. Moreover, we found that only part of religion's preventative effect on initiation was mediated by social bonds, delinquent peers, or self-control. Similarly, Jang et al. (2008) found that youth raised by parents emphasized the importance of religious training as well as service attendance were less likely to use drugs during adolescence and early adulthood than those who were raised not prioritizing religious training and attendance (see also Jang and Johnson 2011). Not surprisingly, we also found that church-attending minority youth from disadvantaged communities are less likely to use illicit drugs than white youth from suburban communities who attend church less frequently or not at all (Johnson et al. 2001). These finding, in general, suggests that youth who continue to attend and participate in religious activities are less likely to commit a variety of illegal acts.

A mounting body of evidence also suggests that such effects persist even if there is not a strong prevailing social control against delinquent behavior in the surrounding community (Jang and Johnson 2003, 2004, 2005; Johnson et al. 2000a). Stated

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et al. (2001) *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Oxford University Press; see also Johnson (2002) "Objective Hope - Assessing the Effectiveness of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature," Institute for Studies of Religion, *ISR Research Report*, Baylor University (2002).



differently, youth from “bad places” can still turn out to be “good kids” if religious beliefs and practices are regular and important in their lives. There is additional evidence that religious involvement may lower the risks of a broad range of delinquent behaviors, ranging from minor to serious forms of criminal behavior (Evans et al. 1996; Regnerus 2003; Wallace and Forman 1998). Whereas criminologists have tended to focus on the effects of community disadvantage on predisposing youth to delinquent behavior, we are now beginning to understand the effects that religious participation may play in providing communities of “advantage” for youth within these disadvantaged environments. In other words, regular church attendance during adolescence may be a critical and undervalued element in enhancing the behavioral trajectories of youth as they move into adulthood (Petts 2009).

In a similar vein, preliminary research has examined intergenerational religious influence and finds parental religious devotion protects girls from delinquency (Regnerus 2003). There is additional research documenting that religion can be used as a tool to help prevent especially difficult populations, like high-risk urban youths from engaging in delinquent behavior (Johnson et al. 2001, 2000a). For example, youth living in poverty tracts in urban environments, or what criminologists call disadvantaged communities, are at elevated risk for a number of problem behaviors including poor school performance, drug use, and other delinquent activities (Johnson et al. 2000a). However, youth from these same disorganized communities who participate in religious activities are significantly less likely to be involved in deviant activities. In this way, religiously committed youth are “resilient” to and protected from the negative consequences of living in impoverished communities.

Confirmed in previous meta-analyses as well as the current systematic review of the crime and religion literature reported in this chapter, we now have solid empirical evidence demonstrating that religion is a protective factor that may buffer or shield youth as well as adults from delinquency, crime, and recidivism. Youth exposure to religious and spiritual activities, in conjunction with other environmental factors, is a powerful inhibitor of juvenile delinquency and youth violence. For example, youth who attend church frequently are less likely to engage in a variety of delinquent behaviors, including drug use, skipping school, fighting and violent, and nonviolent crimes. The fact that these findings hold even in disadvantaged communities provides additional evidence of the connection between religiousness and resilience. Stated differently, the role of religion and religious institutions is especially critical in communities where crime and delinquency are most prevalent.

In sum, a review of the research on religious practices or commitments and deviant behavior indicates that, in general, higher levels of religious involvement are associated with lower rates of crime and delinquency. The empirical evidence demonstrates that those who are most involved in religious activities are less likely to commit criminal or delinquent acts. Thus, aided by systematic reviews of the relevant literature, it is accurate to state that religiosity is now beginning to be acknowledged as a key protective factor that buffers or shields youth from criminal and delinquency outcomes.

### 1.3.2 Religion Promotes Prosocial Behavior

Criminologists have long studied factors thought to be causes of crime and delinquency. Thousands of studies, journal articles, and books have been dedicated to examining the many characteristics of offenders, communities, as well as the antecedents to criminal behavior in order to more accurately predict the likelihood of future criminal behavior. A great deal of criminological research, therefore, can be understood as attempting to answer two basic questions—*Why do people commit crime?* and *How can we prevent it?* As a result, much of the relevant research focuses on the deleterious effects of poverty and disadvantage, lack of education, or unemployment in causing or contributing to crime and deviant behavior. As a result of this focus, it comes as no surprise that many criminology courses are devoted to the study of factors associated with crime causation.

Social scientists and criminologists, however, have much less often asked another equally important question—*Why is it that most people do not commit crime?* Social control theorists like Travis Hirschi (1969) provide a unique and important perspective arguing that there are very important reasons why people do not commit crime or delinquent behavior. Studying and emphasizing factors that essentially keep people from breaking the law, control theorists reason, ultimately advance our understanding of how to pursue crime prevention. Religion, therefore, is but one of many factors that control theorists might argue “bond” an individual to society and conventional or normative behavior. Indeed, it is not a stretch to imagine how religion might play a central “bonding” role between each of Hirschi’s four elements at the heart of social control theory—attachments, commitments, involvements, and beliefs (1969).<sup>5</sup>

As demonstrated from the systematic review of the extant research literature, increasing religiosity is a well-documented protective factor that insulates or buffers youth and even adults from crime and delinquency. In this way, religion may help individuals to be resilient and to avoid delinquent paths in spite of factors and characteristics that would seem to otherwise predict a deviant behavioral trajectory. But beyond acknowledging that religion can protect people from crime, criminologists have largely overlooked another equally important question. Less commonly acknowledged by researchers is the contribution of religious belief and participation in fostering positive or normative behavior—what we call prosocial behavior. I argue here that it is at least as important to understand why people turn into good citizens as to understand why some go bad. In essence, instead of asking why

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<sup>5</sup> Social control theory is not unique in its theoretical relevance for the role of religion in reducing or preventing crime and delinquency. Social disorganization, labeling, differential association, life course perspective, rational choice, and strain are but a few of the theoretical perspectives within criminology that easily allow the introduction of religious variables and influences within existing frameworks. These lines of inquiry make it possible for researchers to generate and test hypotheses of direct and indirect contributions of religion variables in explaining any number of outcomes relevant for criminology and delinquency studies.

people do bad things, like committing crime, we should be asking this question—*Why is that so many people do positive or prosocial things?*

Solid research confirms that at-risk youth from disadvantaged communities who exhibit higher levels of religiousness are not only less likely to commit crimes than their disadvantaged counterparts, but they are also more likely to stay in school, make better grades, and more likely to find and retain steady employment (Freeman 1986; Johnson et al. 2000a). Unfortunately, such research usually emphasizes only the crime reduction story and tends to neglect the prosocial findings. Clearly, not enough scholarship has examined the prosocial side of the equation. Social scientists need to do a much better job of documenting the factors and conditions that motivate, cause, support, and sustain positive or prosocial behavior. It is important to note that when discussing prosocial behavior there is much more involved here than merely obeying the law and desisting from criminal behavior. We need to know why people do admirable things or altruistic acts. For example, why is it that people do commendable things such as supporting charities, donating their time through volunteering, returning lost valuables, or participating in civic activities?

Though less studied, there are a number of studies that examine the relationship between increasing religiosity and higher levels of prosocial behavior. This small body of research consistently finds that religious participation is a source for promoting or enhancing beneficial outcomes like well-being (Blazer and Palmore 1976; Graney 1975; Markides 1983; Musick 1996; Tix and Frazier 1997; Willits and Crider 1988), hope, meaning and purpose (Sethi and Seligman 1993), self-esteem (Ellison and George 1994; Bradley 1995; Koenig et al. 1999), and even educational attainment (Regnerus 2000; Regnerus 2001; Johnson et al. 2000a; Jaynes 2007). Indeed, the more actively religious are more likely to give to charities (both religious and nonreligious) and to volunteer time for civic purposes (Brooks 2006). Studies also suggest that being involved in or exposed to altruistic or prosocial activities and attitudes—something that many churches and other faith-based organizations reportedly have as intrinsic aspects of their mission—appears to reduce the risk of youth violence. Unraveling the role of religiousness, religiosity, religious institutions and congregations, as well as religious participation in promoting prosocial behavior should be a priority for academic researchers. A proper understanding of the mechanisms associated with prosocial behavior can assist in the development of future prevention and intervention strategies.

Just as the studies reviewed earlier document that religious commitment is a protective factor that buffers individuals from various harmful outcomes (e.g., hypertension, depression, suicide, and crime), there is mounting empirical evidence to suggest that religious commitment is also a source for promoting or enhancing beneficial outcomes (e.g., well-being, hope, meaning and purpose, educational attainment, and charitable giving). This review of a large number of diverse studies concludes that, in general, the effect of religion on physical and mental health outcomes is remarkably positive (Koenig et al. 2001; Johnson 2002). These findings have led some religious healthcare practitioners to conclude that further collaboration between religious organizations and health services may be desirable (Miller 1987; Olson 1988; Levin 1984).

Religious involvement may provide networks of support that help adolescents internalize values that encourage behavior that emphasizes concern for others' welfare. Such processes may contribute to the acquisition of positive attributes that give adolescents a greater sense of empathy toward others, which in turn makes them less likely to commit acts that harm others. Recent research confirms that religiosity can help youth to be resilient even in the midst of poverty, crime, and other social ills commonly linked to deleterious outcomes. Frequent participation in religious activities may help adolescents learn values that give them a greater sense of empathy toward others. Similarly, once individuals become involved in deviant behavior, it is possible that participation in specific kinds of religious activity can help steer them back to a course of less deviant behavior and, more important, away from potential career criminal paths. For example, preliminary empirical studies addressing faith-based approaches to prison treatment have shown that inmates who regularly participate in volunteer-led Bible Studies or who complete a faith-based program are less likely to commit institutional infractions (Hercik 2004a, b) or commit new crimes following release from prison (Johnson et al. 1997; Johnson 2004). In the first major evaluation study of a faith-based prison launched in 1997 in Houston, Texas, Johnson and Larson (2003) found that inmates completing the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, an 18- to 24-month length faith-based prison program operated by Prison Fellowship (a Christian prison ministry), were significantly less likely to be re-incarcerated than a matched group of prisoners not receiving this religious intervention (8 % to 20 %, respectively) during a 2-year post-release period. Similar results were reported in a study comparing former prisoners in two Brazil prisons—one a faith-based prison program<sup>6</sup> and the other a model prison based on a vocational model<sup>7</sup> in Brazil (Johnson 2002).

I have demonstrated from a systematic and objective assessment of the research literature that individual religious commitment or religiosity as well as religious congregations can have a significant buffering or protective effect that lessens the likelihood of delinquent or criminal behavior among youth as well as adults. In a separate review of the research literature I also document that increasing measures of religiousness are associated with an array of prosocial outcomes. In this way, we can argue that religion not only protects from deleterious outcomes like crime and delinquency, but also promotes prosocial or beneficial outcomes that are considered normative and necessary for a productive and civil society.

## 1.4 Conclusions

This chapter confirms that religious participation influences the behavior of many people in multiple settings such as family, peers, and school. The overwhelming majority of studies reviewed document the importance of religious participation in

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<sup>6</sup>Based on a Catholic model, the faith-based prison went by the name Humaita.

<sup>7</sup>In 2000, the Braganca prison was widely promoted as an exemplar and a model for future prisons in Brazil.

protecting individuals from harmful outcomes as well as promoting beneficial and prosocial outcomes. The beneficial relationship between religion and health behaviors and outcomes is not simply a function of religion's constraining function or what it discourages—such as opposing drug use or delinquent behavior—but also through what it encourages—promoting behaviors that can enhance purpose, well-being, or educational attainment.

Although some researchers have identified low religiosity as a risk factor for health risk behaviors, measures of religious participation are not routinely included in most social science or criminological research projects. Future research on crime and social outcomes should include multiple measures of religious practices and beliefs. It is time for researchers and federal funding agencies to discontinue the pattern of overlooking this important line of policy-relevant research. New research will allow us to more fully understand the ways in which religion directly or indirectly impacts crime and other social outcomes. Churches, synagogues, mosques, inner-city blessing stations, and other houses of worship represent one of the few institutions that remain within close proximity of most adolescents, their families, and their peers. This is especially true for our most disadvantaged communities. Research is now beginning to confirm that these religious institutions have the potential to play an important role in promoting the health and well-being of those they serve.

As policy makers consider strategies to reduce delinquency, gang violence, and crime, it is essential to seriously and intentionally consider the role of religious institutions and religious practices in implementing, developing, and sustaining multifaceted approaches. From after-school programs for disadvantaged youth to public/private partnerships that bring together secular and sacred groups to tackle social problems like the prisoner reentry crisis, it is apparent that any crime-fighting strategy will be needlessly incomplete unless communities of faith and their vast networks of social and spiritual support are integrally involved.

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