

Criminologist identifies factors leading to criminal behavior

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It has long been believed that criminal behavior is a result of poor self-control, a trait experts often blame on parents. But FIU criminologist Ryan Meldrum says parents should not shoulder the blame alone.

For him, the equation is much more complex. Meldrum has devoted his career to examining [self-control](#) from a life-course perspective, trying to find out what causes it, how it develops over time, how it operates with other factors to explain behavior, and what other consequences to which it can lead. Sometimes, poor parenting is to blame. Sometimes, friends are the problem. Sleep, more specifically the lack of it, can even lead to self-control issues.

"Self-control is a concept that is so interdisciplinary," Meldrum said. "It's at the core of explaining situations like why someone wasn't able to keep himself or herself from eating a doughnut, speeding in a car, cheating on a spouse or robbing a liquor store. It unifies so many behaviors and lapses in judgment."

Neuroimaging has shown that self-control is associated with the [prefrontal cortex](#), a region in the front part of the brain. Factors such as improper prenatal care, improper infant and childcare, poor childhood nutrition and exposure to drugs and toxins, among others, can affect the development of the prefrontal cortex.

But other factors, like who your friends are and how much sleep you get, can affect your abilities to regulate feelings and actions that could prove

to be destructive. Meldrum has found self-control continues to evolve during adolescence with teens experiencing changes in levels of self-control over time. The self-control levels and delinquent behavior of a teen's peers contribute to those variations of self-control. Sleep deprived teens who fail to get restful sleep on a regular basis are less able to effectively regulate their own behavior. Adolescents who are extremely sleep-deprived, getting less than five hours of sleep a night, are more likely to become obese, abuse drugs, engage in drunk driving and even show suicidal tendencies. Meldrum has found teens with low self-control and low exposure to authoritative parenting are more likely to self-harm as a result of bullying. Those with high self-control and exposure to authoritative parenting are more likely to see the future consequences of their actions and not harm or try to kill themselves.

"Because self-control is influenced by and influences a wide array of things that start in childhood and continue into adulthood, we need to consider what can be done early on in life to maximize the potential of people who can develop and raise children with high self-control," Meldrum said. "If you can address a problem early on when the brain and personality are still in development, you will be in a much better position to prevent the manifestation of serious deficits in self-control."

Meldrum hopes the knowledge gained from research on self-control is used to effect real-world change, influencing policy at a large-scale level to target people with early predispositions towards low self-control, and families and communities at a disadvantage.

Provided by Florida International University

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