

Why criminals cannot say 'no'



A study integrating theories from criminology and psychology has provided an in-depth explanation for the link between self-control and why people get into crime.

Dr Mei Williams (pictured), who graduated at Massey's Auckland campus recently with a PhD in psychology, says the relationship between self-control and criminal activity has been little understood in psychological terms. Findings from her study suggest possibilities for the treatment and prevention of criminal behaviour.

“While criminologists have found low self-control to be one of the strongest risk factors for crime, its lack of explanatory power has been a major concern,” she says.

In her study, she compared the level of self-control, motivation, and criminal intentions between students and prison inmates. Both groups were asked about their criminal activity over the previous 12 months, the opportunities that would encourage or prevent criminal involvement, attitudes towards crime, the expectations of important others, and the person's confidence and control over their behaviour should they wish to commit a crime.

Low self-control featured more strongly as an explanation for intentions to commit crime for prison inmates than it did for students. While self-control was an important aspect, of even greater significance for both groups was the role of significant others. This was especially related to the expectations of significant others, and the willingness of the individual to comply with those expectations. This factor appeared to be crucial as to whether a person with low self-control got involved in crime or not.

Rehabilitation programmes that help inmates develop better self-control through self-management techniques and by ensuring there are “important others” who are positive role models would have a powerful way of countering not only crime but other detrimental behaviours, such as aggression and general delinquency, she says.

Dr Williams teaches forensic psychology at Massey's School of Psychology in Auckland and has worked with the Corrections Department's psychological services in developing treatment plans for prison inmates. She believes being in prison is often a time when criminals are at a crossroads in their lives and had the opportunity to re-evaluate themselves and their attitudes.

“That's when we need to focus on self-management and finding out what things they value.”

She says inmates are no different to law-abiding citizens in that they shared the same goal of getting money and wanting to look after their family, but they had different values and behavioural patterns when it came to achieving these goals.

“They need to learn pro-social values, such as how to achieve their goals without hurting other people.”

Source: Massey University

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