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PROJECT 1: Crime and Religion

The relationship between crime and religion has long been a complicated and widely debated topic, centered on how religious beliefs may influence moral and criminal behavior. Much of the research in this area focuses on whether the practice of religion can help prevent people from committing crimes. Early studies identified a structural and mental relationship between religion and criminal behavior, but more recent work examined the more specific role the practice of religion plays in shaping moral-decision making. Scholars have specifically explored how religious practices, beliefs and social standards affect an individual's decision making and his or her propensity to commit crimes. However, more cross-cultural research is needed to better understand the extent to which religion influences crime, particularly across different societies and belief systems.

Several published studies delve into the different ways this relationship shows up in real life. In the peer reviewed article by Adamczyk, Freilich, and Kim, the authors examine criminal activity and study how the presence of religion can have a deterring effect on crime¹. The authors systematically review empirical research of the last ten years on religion and crime. They discuss three measures of religiousness (belief, practice, and affiliation). From there, each dimension of religiousness is assessed to determine if it impacts criminal actions in society. The general findings in the article are that religion can significantly reduce criminal activity. The authors

¹ Adamczyk, A., Freilich, J. D., & Kim, C. (2017). Religion and crime: A systematic review and assessment of next steps. *Sociology of Religion*, 78(2), 192–223.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx012>

acknowledge shortfalls in their study. They relied on self-reported data, which can result in some findings not accurately representing the broader population due to personal biases and other mitigating factors. In the same note, Sumter et al. (2018) article shows how religion impacts criminal activity at two different levels (individual and societal)². It is important to note how individuals' morals and beliefs change the institutional reaction. It examines two different ways in which religion plays a role in decreasing criminal activity. The article discusses how religion has an impact at the micro level, meaning religion can sway the choices an individual makes. Next, the article assesses the impact religion has on a societal level. This suggests that societal support and the level of participation religion offers can also help decrease crime in a community. This article delves into the research and evidence on the relationship, also highlighting how research has not yet identified which feature of religion has the greatest impact on criminal activity. The article also provides great depth on methodological diversity in both a qualitative and quantitative angle. There is a visible lack of knowledge of how social organizations like schools, families, and peer networks come into play with religion. This illustrates there is still a need for more study on the impact religion has on larger communities.

More recent sources, like Jang (2022), discuss how reform is impacted by religion³. Jang, discusses how rehabilitation is connected to religion. In terms of criminology and this research paper, the article examines moral reform through individual traits, beliefs, and identity. The article shows religion can play a major role in an individual's self identity through things such as

² Sumter, M. T., Wood, F., Whitaker, I., & Berger-Hill, D. (2018). Religion and crime studies: Assessing what has been learned. *Religions*, 9(6), 193. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9060193>

³ Jang, S. J. (2022). Religion and rehabilitation as moral reform: Conceptualization and preliminary evidence. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 49(12), 1775–1797. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548221115040>

their life purpose and goals. In regards to religion, this article notes how rehabilitation based on faith can decrease negative feelings and raise personal values. The way this journal delves into this connotation is through a quasi-experiment that was done in a prison in Texas that was faith based. The study used a convenience sample of incarcerated males. Then, the authors compared the prisoners who finished the faith-based program to those who didn't. Any prisoner who completed the program grew in their religious beliefs which resulted in some form of individual self-change (purpose or meaning of life and self-identity). The article states that the faith-based program reduced the aggression of inmates and the tension within the prison. But it also noted there were pitfalls to the study. The data was self-reported, and a captured amount of males incarcerated in the state of Texas. The results could be different if the study was done in another state, or perhaps with female inmates.

Johnston (2025), meanwhile, approached the topic of religion and crime in a different way⁴. This article uses a natural experiment to analyze the effects of a city-wide religious event on crime rates. In the study, author Johnston discusses how a large city-wide religious event increases the number of people who attend church for a short time. Johnston then goes on to examine whether the event, and the short term church-going attendance boost, had any impact on the crime rate in that city. After his examination, Johnston shows that there was a temporary drop in crime for a few weeks after the significant event, especially property crime. This journal article helps show how real life religious events can have a large impact on crime in the surrounding community and how people behave. It also points out while there are impacts and large effects from these events, their impact is usually short-lived.

⁴ Johnston, D. (2025). Religiosity and crime: Evidence from a city-wide shock. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 228, 386–402.

Cooper and Bouffard (2023) go into detail on how religiosity impacts the purpose behind crime as religion helps add in moral control⁵. Authors Cooper and Bouffard delve into the different ways in which criminal behavior is inversely related to social bonds, like religiosity. They suggest that greater religious commitment is associated with a lower probability of committing criminal offenses. The authors don't study the actual commission of crimes, but rather the subjects' intentions to commit them. The article notes that, as a whole, there is limited research about religiosity's impact on the adult population, particularly serious criminal activities. The authors use survey data from a large male and female sample of people incarcerated for felonies in a southwestern correctional system. The study includes a series of regression analyses that compare the relationship between people intending to drive drunk and their level of religious commitment. The study suggests that religious devotion may serve as some sort of moral control mechanism. Along with this data, the authors examined their same question among gender and racial differences. The data showed the relationship between crime and religion as was similar across races and genders.

Lastly, another peer reviewed article by Cochran and Akers (1989) discusses the way peer and familial influences can help reshape adolescents' criminal activity⁶. delves into the connection that religion and delinquency have in light of social structures. The authors study 724 adolescents from four separate high schools, illustrating the connection between religion and delinquency. The key points show how detrimental the measure of religion used is on this

⁵ Cooper, M., & Bouffard, J. (2023). Exploring the relationship between religiosity and offending intentions among various sub-samples of incarcerated individuals. *Crime & Delinquency*, 70(1), 95–121. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00111287231202981>

⁶ Cochran, J. K., & Akers, R. L. (1989). Religion and delinquency: The relationship after considering family and peer influences. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 26(3), 213–231 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1387884>

relationship. The article also examines how peer and family structure shapes students' behaviors and the types of delinquency considered. Religion is mostly linked to status offenses rather than serious crimes. The study also noted that evangelism was not significantly related to delinquency within this sample. The article points out that there is further research needed to really understand this connection, however, it is helpful because it highlights the relationship religion has on adolescents and crime.

Overall, these studies show that there is a possibility that religion can have a deterring effect on crime, however, the studies also have shortcomings and prove that there is more research that needs to be done. The studies show that there needs to be broader studies conducted, including with different genders, ages and types of religions to show whether there are different results. Meanwhile, there is so much research that notes the effect religion has isn't just one-sided, it is very deep and complex. There are a lot of individual and community beliefs that all play a role in a person's development. Lots of the research looked at shows how religion has an impact on the decisions a person will make from their morals. This has a direct impact on the further decision to commit a crime or not. Another way religion can change crime rates is it changes the community dynamics. It impacts a larger society by creating a place with support and a place where people can feel they belong. Not only that, but it holds them accountable to their actions and how it matches their religion's beliefs. While this is all true, there is also proof religion doesn't automatically assure crime is inhibited. Sometimes individuals take religious beliefs and findings in their own interpretation or have a different level of devotion to it.

Most importantly, a lot of the research done is majorly dependent on self-report facts. This strongly impacts the ability we have to generalize the finding to a larger population. When self-reporting, individuals may change the way they respond to seem more religious than what's

true, strongly impacting the accuracy of how religion is truly impacting their actions. Along with this, the research done on religion and crime is usually from Christian dominated contexts so it leaves out the findings of other religious impacts as a full view. In order to help improve this, researchers should focus on a diverse group of religions over long periods of time. Along with this, they could compare many different outlying factors religion impacts like a person's education, family life, and even economic status. By further developing the research on crime and religion, there can be a better understanding of if religion is the factor itself or if it has to do with the larger pieces of moral beliefs behind it.