



The influence of criminal offending on union formation and union dissolution for disadvantaged individuals



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ABSTRACT

Using a sample of 248 males and females from The Netherlands, we study the effect of criminal offending on union formation and union dissolution. Criminal and relational careers of high-risk respondents are analyzed using a long observation period (age 12 to age 36). Findings for men support the hypothesis that past criminal offending reduces the likelihood of being involved in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, male's past violent offending increases the probability of being single. Analysis of union dissolution for males showed that only recent violent offending is associated with the termination of a romantic relationship. Similar to our findings for men, findings for females show that the likelihood of being involved in a romantic relationship is negatively associated with past criminal offending. Moreover, it is an extended cumulative history of property offenses that significantly increases the likelihood of being single throughout the observation period. For women, recent offending significantly increases the probability of separation/divorce.

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1. Introduction

An extensive body of research has focused on the effect of romantic relationships (marriage in particular) on offending for both males and females (Farrington & West, 1995; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007; Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwbeerta, 2009; Zoutewelle-Terovan, van der Geest, Liefbroer, & Bijleveld, 2012; Jaffee, Lombardi, & Coley, 2013). However, considerably less attention has been paid to the opposite relationship, namely the effect of criminal behavior on romantic relationships. Moreover, the existing research that investigated this opposite direction paid relatively little attention to some potentially relevant aspects.

First, the majority of existing studies analyzed the effect of *incarceration* rather than the effect of offending on the likelihood

of marriage and divorce. Often, incarceration studies have been criticized for observing a selective group of individuals, namely persons who commit most serious offenses, have extended criminal histories (Apel, Blokland, Nieuwbeerta, & van Schellen, 2010), and are physically separated from (prospective) romantic partners. However, what such studies did not address is the fact that antisocial behavior (not necessarily associated with incarceration) might by itself significantly influence the development of romantic life (van Schellen, Poortman, & Nieuwbeerta, 2011; Jaffee et al., 2013). This is of particular interest in countries such as the Netherlands (the country where our study was conducted), known for a liberal penal climate, with low incarceration rates and short incarceration periods.

Second, studies investigating the effects of criminal behavior on romantic relationships predominantly concentrated on *marriage*. This was only a minor limitation for older cohorts, where marriage was the dominant form of intimate relationship (van Schellen et al., 2011; Sampson et al., 2006). Among more recent cohorts, family life trends have become less standardized (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007) and non-marital unions (especially cohabitation) have become the norm rather than the exception in many countries. Furthermore, to a notable extent, previous

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research has analyzed the probability and timing of *first marriage* (respectively *first divorce*). In modern societies, with individuals often experiencing multiple and sequential unions during adolescent and adult life, life-course research should devote considerable attention to the influence of offending on multiple romantic involvements.

Third, much of the existing literature centered on the effect of a cumulative number of offenses on union formation. To date, few studies have analyzed different *types of offenses* (King & South, 2011). It is envisageable that some kinds of offenses (notably violent offenses) jeopardize relationships more than others. Previous literature has been limited in providing answers on whether various types of offenses encompass unique characteristics or reflect different expressions of the same underlying criminal propensity.

Fourth, previous research has mainly focused on *male* offenders. Studying female offenders was often problematic given the low rate of offending among this group (Huebner, 2005; Apel et al., 2010; Jaffee et al., 2013). However, it is important to extend research to female offenders and provide answers to questions about gender differences.

Given this situation, the aim of this study is to investigate the influence of criminal behavior on union formation and union dissolution. Using a high-risk sample of males and females in the Netherlands, the current study will be guided by the following research questions:

- (1) Does offending negatively influence the likelihood of being involved in a romantic relationship?
- (2) Is the effect of offending on intimate relationships different for different types of unions (any relationship or a living-together relationship)?
- (3) Does offending positively influence the likelihood of separation from a romantic partner?
- (4) Do different types of offenses (violent, property) have a similar effect on the likelihood of being involved in an intimate relationship or terminating an existing one?
- (5) Are there gender differences in any of the above?

2. Background and hypotheses

2.1. Criminal behavior and union formation

Symbolic interactionism offers one account of the potential effects of criminal behavior on union formation. Labeling theorists argue that criminal behavior negatively influences various life events (Lemert, 1967; Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989), and romantic prospects are diminished through the stigma attached to an offender. A 'criminal status' might define an individual as immature, unreliable, untrustworthy, connected to criminally involved peers, and prone to reoffend (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Lopoo & Western, 2005). Furthermore, after engaging in initial criminal behavior (primary deviance), an individual might change his self-concept and internalize a deviant identity (Lemert, 1967). As individuals commit to a criminal life-style (secondary deviance), the negative consequences of stigma perpetuate and cumulate throughout adult life, limiting one's opportunities for romantic involvement.

Much of the current knowledge about the mechanisms explaining the effect of a criminal record on romantic relationships results from research focusing on the consequences of incarceration on marital unions. A great deal of evidence supports the idea that recent incarceration reduces short-term probability of marriage (Huebner, 2005; Sampson et al., 2006). Less consensus exists regarding the long-term effects of incarceration on marriage. Some studies provide support for the hypothesis that prior

incarceration reduces the probability of marriage (Sampson et al., 2006; Huebner, 2007). Other studies do not report long-term effects of incarceration on marriage (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Apel et al., 2010). For females, the long-term effects of incarceration on marriage remain unclear given that all studies previously mentioned analyzed male respondents only.

The impact of criminal behavior on the probability of marriage received considerably less attention. Using a conviction sample, van Schellen et al. (2011) found that, compared to non-offenders, the likelihood of marriage was reduced by 24% for offenders committing more than six offenses until the previous year, and by 42% for men who committed more than 10 offenses. Men who committed fewer offenses did not differ in their likelihood of marriage compared to non-offenders. In their analysis, the effect of a criminal record diminished over time. A different study conducted by Sampson et al. (2006) found that male juvenile delinquent behavior was negatively associated with the likelihood of marriage. Similarly, a study of twins revealed that men with lower levels of antisocial behavior are more likely to marry (Burt et al., 2010). Yet, the study of Barnes et al. (2011) found no significant effect of criminal behavior on marriage. Similar to the incarceration studies, research on criminal behavior has focused predominantly on men.

More recent studies examined romantic relationships (other than marriage) as an outcome. Similar to the marriage studies, there is no general agreement regarding the effects of criminal behavior/incarceration on union formation. Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan (2004) analyzed parents of new born children, and found that men with incarceration records were 19% less likely to be cohabiting (and 37% less likely to be married) in the year their child was born (compared to never-incarcerated males). In a study investigating the reciprocal relationship between cohabitation and offending for students, Lonardo, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore (2010) found that delinquent behavior was associated with 2.6 higher odds of cohabitation. They also concluded that females had higher probabilities to experience cohabitation compared to males. In contrast to these findings, London and Parker (2009) found that incarcerated individuals were about three times more likely to cohabit than non-incarcerated individuals. Moreover, Rebellon and Manasse (2004) concluded that men with more delinquent activity were associated with more extended romantic activity.

Starting from these considerations, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1.** Offending increases the likelihood of being without a romantic partner (being single).
- H2.** Offending decreases the likelihood of being involved in a living-together relationship (cohabitation and marriage versus singlehood or non-cohabitation).

2.2. Types of offenses and union formation

Existing theories have not extensively discussed whether specific types of offenses (e.g. violent, property) differ in their influence on intimate relationships. Furthermore, the effect of various types of offenses on union formation has rarely been empirically tested.

Studies analyzing the influence of violent offending on romantic relationships provided mixed results. Focusing on marital unions, Sampson et al. (2006) found that a history of violent offending reduced the likelihood of marriage for males. Other studies found no significant relation between violent crime and marriage (Lopoo & Western, 2005; van Schellen et al., 2011). A particular group of studies focused on domestic violence and its association with

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