



# Family formation and crime: What role for the family network?



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## ABSTRACT

Being part of a family involved with crime may shape one's own family formation process through constraints in the partner market and one's own family-related preferences. In this paper, we examine the role crime in family networks plays for two important family processes: the transition to parenthood and the transition to first marriage. Using high-quality, individual-level register data from Norway, we estimate discrete-time event history models of the transition to first marriage and parenthood. Results show that crime in the family network, for both men and women, is associated with lower transition rates to first marriage and higher transition rates to first birth. (104 words)

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## 1. Introduction

Being part of a family involved with crime is likely to shape both one's own preferences for family formation and affect the opportunity structure for forming a family. In this paper, we examine the role crime in the family networks of individuals potentially play for two important family formation processes: the transition to parenthood and the transition to first marriage. Having a stable relationship and becoming a parent is generally associated with a wide range of positive outcomes (see e.g. Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011; Kravdal et al., 2012). If criminogenic environments, directly or indirectly, exclude individuals from such benefits, corresponding knowledge has potential implications for social policy in the sense that the social costs of crime extend beyond the offender himself.

Criminological studies have largely focused on crime as an outcome variable. Typically, criminological studies are not focussed on how crime affects other outcomes including, but not limited to, life course transitions. There are of course exceptions: Studies have taken up to what extent a criminal record affects employment chances (Grogger, 1995; Pager, 2003), whether imprisonment increases the risk of divorce (Lopoo & Western, 2005), and the relationship between crime and mortality (Sattar & Killias, 2005; Skardhamar & Skirbekk, 2013). Much criminological research that involves marriage and childbearing has been concerned with the

effects of life course transitions on crime. There is, for example, a large literature on the potential effects of getting married on desistance (e.g. Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998), on illicit drug use (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006), and on a range of other outcomes. Effects of crime on demographic behaviour are to the best of our knowledge largely unexplored. There are numerous studies on the relationship only between parents' and offspring's offending, and it is established that crime "runs in the family" (Hjalmarsson & Lindqvist, 2012, 2013; Besemer and Farrington, 2012). Moreover, it has been found that parental crime, and particular imprisonment, has adverse effects on their children's antisocial behaviour, mental health and school performance (Murray & Farrington, 2008), but the literature is mixed (cf. Besemer, Geest, Murray, Bijleveld, & Farrington, 2011), and it is less clear whether this has long-term consequences in other domains of life. However, Rud, van Klaveren, Groot, and van den Brink (2012) show that parental crime is associated with lower educational attainment.

Demographic studies of family formation patterns, on the other hand, have largely focused on factors such as parents' economic resources, attitudes, or parents' demographic behaviour, and their roles in shaping offspring's family formation (Axinn and Thornton, 1996; Thornton, 1991; Barber, 2000, 2001; Barber and Axinn, 1998). A smaller set of studies have taken up processes of social interactions and intra-generational transmission processes of family formation-related outcomes (Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010; East & Jacobsson, 2001). While most previous research on effects of characteristics of one's family network focuses on the direct or indirect transmission of behaviours from parents and children, this class of arguments can easily be extended to a wider

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group of family members. Jæger (2012) demonstrates the relevance of including the extended family, there defined simply as one's uncles and aunts in studies of educational transmission between the family of origin and an individual.

We argue in this paper that characteristics of the wider family network might be important for family and fertility outcomes. In our analysis, we draw on insights from separate research literatures in demography and criminology and investigate the association between individuals' family formation behaviour on the one hand and crime in their family network on the other hand. To the best of our knowledge, we provide the first analysis that measures the prevalence of crime in both an individual's extended and immediate family networks and study how these measures are associated with the individual's family formation behaviour. We take advantage of the Norwegian system of administrative register data, and are able to link information on formal registrations of demographic behaviour (births and marriages) over a period ranging from early adolescence through adulthood with data on crime covering the same time period. By way of parent-children ID number linkages we can construct measures incorporating information not only on parents and children, but also on a wider set of relatives in an individual's family network.

## 2. Theoretical framework

There are several theoretical starting points for this study. The first is a standard model of family formation processes. Contributions to this body of theory come from sociology, demography, and economics, and can, very superficially, be summarized as a weak rational choice-model of partner search, partner choice, and childbearing. The second starting point is the literature on social interactions on the transition to marriage and parenthood.

First, we briefly present an integrated theory of partner search, union formation and fertility as a conceptual framework for the choices individuals make throughout the family formation process. Then, we modify this framework by adding components that deal specifically with social interactions, including family network effects, and we discuss how offending may relate to these mechanisms.

### 2.1. The economic-demographic theory of union formation and fertility

The process of forming a romantic relationship, and eventually a marriage, with a partner is in the economic-demographic theory of the family conceptualized as a process of search in a market of potential partners (Oppenheimer, 1988; England & Farkas, 1986). One can conceive of this process as a series of meetings of the focal individual and potential partners. For each meeting, the expected future utility from a union is evaluated by both parties. If the expected utility from a union is higher than what both individuals have likely to gain from further search, a union is formed. This line of reasoning permeates much demographic research.

During the partner search process, anything that conveys information about a potential future spouse will be considered in the evaluation of the potential relationship. When searching for a partner as outlined, signals of information about future utility, an inherently unobservable property, will be useful (Gambetta, 2009). Individuals carry signals of their own and interpret characteristics of potential partners as signals of the quality of a future relationship, and eventually marriage. Signals of economic or cultural resources may increase one's attractiveness to other potential partners, and vice versa. Having completed a high education and coming from a wealthy or powerful family may serve as signals of future socioeconomic success in marriage markets (Hansen, 1995).

This argument is complicated by the fact that such processes may operate somewhat differently for men and women. There are likely signals that have gender-specific implications. For example, a cornerstone of the microeconomic theory of the family is the idea that gender specialization in household (non-market) work and market work is efficient and that this should lead to negative assortative mating on wages (and other factors that are positively correlated with productivity in the labour market) (Becker, 1991). Another basic assumption is that the factors that make individuals attractive candidates in the partner market are likely to differ between men and women (Buss, 1989).

We study two different processes: the transition to first marriage and the transition to parenthood. Studying the process of first marriage in a context like the Norwegian, where above 90% of all first unions are cohabiting unions (Wiik, 2009), may seem unreasonable. Cohabitation rates may be even higher in the presence of criminal behaviour, both because the potentially negative consequences of criminal behaviour may affect the willingness to marry and because those who are involved with crime may also have other characteristics associated with a rapid transition to adulthood. This study will be limited in the sense that we only will register transitions to formal marriage, the endpoint of a long process of meeting, dating, moving together and eventually marrying.

When considering a person for a potential (marital) relationship, it is likely that the person's future role as the co-parent of children born in the relationship also is considered relevant information. As long as we concentrate on the early stages of the adult life course, most individuals also desire to have at least one child. The factors influencing the transition to parenthood will thus to a large degree also be relevant for the process into first marriage. It is an empirical question how much weight is given to information about the future role as co-parent when an individual is considered as a potential partner.

There are of course also differences between the processes of entry into (marital) partnerships and parenthood. One difference regards the biological clock of women's (and to a much smaller extent men's) fecundity. This factor is not relevant to our study, due to the limited follow-up. Another difference regards the "wantedness" of the child. Most children are born within stable partnerships, and considered wanted children. For those that are not, some will be the results of a pregnancy unwanted by one or both of the partners. In the Norwegian context of legal, affordable and available contraception technology and abortion, women have a large degree of control of their own fertility (Skjeldestad, 2005). This means that a few individuals may experience the transition to parenthood regardless of their own preferences for (timing of) childbearing.

### 2.2. Peer and network effects on demographic behaviour

A venerable tradition in social sciences has focussed on how behaviours are affected by others' behaviour through interaction. In the criminological literature, the focus has chiefly been on peer groups, school characteristics or neighbourhood effects (Akers, 1973; Warr, 1998). It has been shown that there is a transmission of criminal behaviour across wider family networks (Farrington et al., 2001; van de Rakt, Nieuwebeerta, & Apel, 2009). In studies of effects of family characteristics within demography, it is typically the demographic behaviour of parents or siblings that have served the role as the explanatory factor (see e.g. Barber, 2000; Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010). The argument, however, extends logically to any kind of social exposure, to both family and non-family interactions. We will here consider only members of the family network, but want to extend the perspective by including other members of this network than one's parents and one's siblings. Which individuals

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