



Crime and parenthood: Age and gender differences in the association between criminal careers and parenthood



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ABSTRACT

Criminal careers are linked with life-course careers in other domains. In life-course criminology, thus far research has predominantly focused on the effects conventional events and transitions (such as marriage or work) have on criminal development. Far less attention has been paid to the way that an individual's criminal career in turn may influence an individual's demographic transitions. This one sided research attention inhibits our understanding of how crime resonates through the life-course. The current effort seeks to help overcome this research bias by focusing on the influence crime has on the occurrence and timing of parenthood. Specifically, this paper examines the role of a criminal lifestyle – or in other words a frequent offending career – on the chance to become a first-time parent and whether this influence differs by age, gender and marital status. We use the Criminal Career and Life-Course Study (CCLS), a long-term longitudinal register dataset on a large sample of offenders (4059 men and 384 women) convicted in the Netherlands in 1977. For men and women, we find that being heavily involved in a criminal lifestyle during adolescence and early adulthood is connected with an early experience of parenthood. By contrast, being heavily involved in a criminal lifestyle after the mid-twenties is associated with a lower likelihood of experiencing fatherhood for men but does not any longer influence the transition to motherhood among women. These findings hold regardless of the type of crime. We discuss the possible importance of age-related social expectations for the involvement in crime, the special situation of criminal women and the possible importance of planned and unplanned parenthood to explain the results.

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1. Introduction

A key premise of the life-course approach in criminology is that the criminal career should not be studied in isolation, but in the context of the many other 'careers' that together make up the life-course. Important transitions in other domains can constitute turning points in the individual's criminal development, accelerating desistance, or on the contrary, giving rise to prolonged participation or escalation of crime (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2010; Smith, 2002). Especially transitions that bring about changes in the offender's routine activities or increase his or her stake in conformity or transitions that are associated with changes in the way the offender perceives him/herself and is perceived by others have the potential to redirect the criminal trajectory (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

While several studies have shown crime-reducing effects of marriage and work, the findings for the association between parenthood on crime are mixed (Siennick & Osgood, 2008). This is somewhat surprising, as findings from qualitative studies suggest that becoming a parent brings with it new tasks and responsibilities and may re-orientate individuals from short term gratification toward more long term goals and therefore parenthood should have the potential to act as a turning point promoting desistance from a criminal lifestyle (e.g. Farrall & Calverly, 2006). One reason why findings for parenthood in the desistance process are ambiguous may lie in selection effects into marriage and parenthood. Just like parenthood may change patterns of routine activities, social control or self-image, criminal behavior may change the individual's attractiveness as a partner and the willingness of potential partners to have a child (Van Schellen, Poortman, & Nieuwbeerta, 2011). Also, a criminal lifestyle may not be compatible with the perceived responsibilities of parenthood (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009).

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So far, far less research attention has gone out to studying the influence crime itself may have on life-course transitions such as marriage or parenthood. This inhibits our understanding of how crime resonates through the life-course and impairs the extent to which life-course criminology is able to truly 'make sense of the lives' of its research subjects (Laub & Sampson, 2003). The current study seeks to help overcome this research bias by focusing on the influence crime has on the occurrence and timing of parenthood. Specifically, we ask whether a criminal career has an impact on an offender's chance to become a first-time parent and whether this impact differs by age, gender, and marital status.

We use the Criminal Career and Life-Course Study (CCLS), a long-term longitudinal dataset consisting of 4059 men and 384 women convicted in the Netherlands in 1977. Using yearly data from ages 12 to 50 for convictions, marriage, and children, we run logit models for single events (first parenthood) and competing events (first parenthood within and outside marriage). Our main explanatory variable is a time-varying variable indicating whether an individual belonged to the highest criminal quartile among all individuals still at risk of experiencing first child birth in a given age-year. All analyses are done separately for men and women.

2. Previous research on criminal careers and parenthood

2.1. Desistance and parenthood

Two lines of research have examined the association between criminal behavior and parenthood. First, both qualitative and quantitative studies have focused on the extent to which becoming a parent promotes desistance from crime. According to arguments derived largely from Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993), parenthood – similar to other life-course transitions such as marriage, work or military service – has the potential to redirect criminal trajectories. To begin with, parenthood can lead to a change in routine activity patterns by limiting opportunities of crime because child care is largely domestic and limits time spent with deviant peers. It can increase social control due to an increased stake in conformity by forming feelings of attachment as well as emotional and financial obligations. Perceived negative consequences of criminal behavior increase with parenthood such as the risk of unemployment or child service involvement. Finally, parenthood may change the self-image of new parents. Many male offenders argue that being a parent is not compatible with criminal activities (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2001; Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Despite arguments from criminological theory and evidence from qualitative studies that support a crime reducing effect of parenthood, particularly due to a new self-image and cognitive changes (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Moloney et al., 2009; Shannon & Abrams, 2007), quantitative results are best described as inconclusive. Whereas some studies have found a crime-reducing parenthood effect for men (Kerr, Capaldi, Owen, Wiesner, & Pears, 2011; Savolainen, 2009; Zoutewelle-Terovan, Van der Geest, Liefbroer, & Bijleveld, 2014), other studies have found no effect (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Giordano et al., 2002; Monsbakken, Lyngstad, & Skardhamar, 2013; Warr, 1998) or even a crime-enhancing parenthood effect (Farrington & West, 1995).

These diverging results may be partly dependent on union type characteristics, such as having a child within and outside marriage or in a "high quality" relationship (Sampson & Laub, 2003). The results may also depend on the age of the samples. A UK study by Farrington and West (1995) found that cohabitation increased criminal behavior, however, the opposite was found for more current studies from Finland (Savolainen, 2009) and Norway (Monsbakken et al., 2013) where cohabitation was much more

common. This may signify that cohabitation represented an unstable relationship in older cohorts. Savolainen (2009) found that recidivists in any stable partner union with children were more likely to desist and Monsbakken et al. (2013) found a decrease in crime leading toward the first birth for married couples but also for those in committed cohabiting unions.

It is often argued that female offenders should be more affected by parenthood. They experience more stress and time restraints when they have a child and are more likely to stay at home with a child and be the main or only custodian. In line with this reasoning, several studies have found at least a temporally crime reducing effect of parenthood for women (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Hope, Wilder, & Watt, 2003; Kreager, Matsueda, & Erosheva, 2010; Monsbakken et al., 2013) or have found that the majority of young women quit their gang involvement once they became a mother (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004). However, in a US school sample Giordano, Seffrin, Manning, and Longmore (2011) showed that parenthood alone did not reduce criminal behavior, rather female crime levels reduced only if it was a planned pregnancy. Quantitative studies by Zoutewelle-Terovan et al. (2014), Giordano et al. (2002), and Varriale (2008) could find no motherhood effect on crime or gang membership.

2.2. Juvenile delinquency and teenage parenthood share risk factors

A second line of literature found juvenile delinquency to be associated with teenage fatherhood (Buston, 2010; Khurana & Gavazzi, 2011; Pears, Pierce, Kim, Capaldi, & Owen, 2005; Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997). Unlike the studies linking parenthood and desistance, these studies do not specifically take a life-course perspective but instead argue that juvenile delinquency and becoming a teenage parent are both symptoms of an underlying (set of) risk factor(s). Among these factors are psychological characteristics such as low self-control and impulsivity leading to a higher risk of problem behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, substance abuse, early initiation of sexual intercourse and multi-partnered sexuality without using contraceptives (Stewart, 2007; Wei, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2002). These risk factors and behaviors are strengthened by underlying compositional factors such as a low socio-economic background, low educational achievements, and problematic family situations. Furthermore, their poorer prospects for a successful future give juvenile delinquents less incentive to protect against unplanned pregnancies (Pears et al., 2005; Thornberry et al., 1997). These risk factors have a strong cumulative influence on the likelihood of juvenile offenders to become teen fathers (Thornberry, Wei, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Dyke, 2000; Unruh, Bullis, & Yovanoff, 2004). Yao, Långström, Temrin, and Walum (2014) even argue that these risk factors signal an alternative reproductive strategy.

Teenage motherhood is a much more likely outcome than delinquency among girls with a similar set of risk factors of impulsivity, poverty, substance abuse, deviant peers and family issues which may explain the weaker interest in studying the link between girl's delinquency and teenage motherhood. However as for men, these problem behaviors are linked (Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1993; Jaffee, 2002; Lanctot & Smith, 2001).

2.3. Parenthood among men and women at high risk to offend

2.3.1. Parenthood intentions of high-risk groups

Male offenders who are asked about their fertility intentions often state that they feel not fit to be a parent in terms of finances or lifestyle (Buston, 2010; Moloney et al., 2009; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Wilkinson, Magora, Garcia, & Khurana, 2009). There is a continued ideal of a stable relationship and a good job providing

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