

# Parental criminality and entry into parenthood among sons and daughters



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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we examined to what extent parental offending influences the timing of entry into parenthood of children. Based on a literature review, we hypothesized that children of delinquent parents would be more likely to enter into parenthood at a relatively young age, and that part of that association could be explained by differences between children of delinquent and non-delinquent parents in the timing of entry into marriage and in their own delinquent behaviour. Using data from a five-generation study of high risk families in the Netherlands, we found that parental delinquency increases the chance of early childbearing among daughters, but not among sons. Among sons, parental delinquency increased son's delinquency, suggesting that parental delinquency has different consequences for the life courses of their sons and daughters.

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## 1. Introduction

What does it mean for children to grow up in a criminal family? A growing literature suggests that the consequences of parental offending for the life course of their children are pervasive. During childhood and adolescence, children of criminal parents are more likely to be exposed to economic hardship, to inconsistent and harsh parental treatment (Thornberry Freeman-Gallant, Lizotte, Krohn, & Smith, 2003), to periods in which one or both parents are incarcerated (Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012), and to social networks that include many other offenders (Junger, Greene, Schipper, Hesper, & Estourgie, 2013). But the consequences may also spill over to adulthood, with children of criminal parents being more likely to become offenders themselves (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001; Van de Weijer, 2014), to experience spells of unemployment (Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Uggen & Wakefield, 2008) or an increased risk of divorce. Adolescents with criminal parents are generally from disadvantaged backgrounds and such vulnerable youth have been shown through exposure to violence to have an increased likelihood of

“precocious exits” to adulthood (Hagan & Foster, 2001), such as early parenthood (Haynie, Petts, Maimon, & Piquero, 2009) and early union formation (Kuhl, Warner & Wilczak, 2012). More generally, Huschek and Bijleveld (2015) showed that children of criminal parents often lead non-standard life courses, i.e. life courses with an early transition to adult roles, life courses that are turbulent in the sense that many shifts between living arrangements occur as a result of events like marriage, divorce, and remarriage, or – conversely – life courses in which few or no changes occur (e.g. as a result of remaining single). In addition, their study suggested that the life-course consequences of growing up in a criminal family could differ between men and women.

Parenthood is a pivotal experience in the lives of many young adults. It alters their perception of themselves (Bailey, 1999), it structures their future course of action (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994), and it has profound consequences for their well-being (Aassve, Goisis, & Sironi, 2012; Hansen, 2012). In this study, we will investigate whether growing up in a criminal family influences the timing of entry into parenthood among Dutch young adults. A number of arguments can be put forward to expect a relatively early entry into parenthood among children of criminal parents. Children of criminal parents may have a heightened tendency to take risks. As a result, they may be less likely to use contraceptives and more likely to experience non-normative transitions, leading to an increased likelihood of experiencing

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early parenthood. Relatedly, children from criminal families are more likely to stem from lower socio-economic strata and may have had less knowledge of, or access to contraceptives or means to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Finally, as many children of criminal parents come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have little social capital, early parenthood may be for some the only option for an escape from a violent and abusive home. However, children from delinquent criminal parents may be more likely to lack the necessary skills to enter and maintain social relationships, leading to a heightened risk to postpone or forego union formation. As a result, they may enter into parenthood late or not at all. Empirically, we know surprisingly little about how growing up in a criminal family affects parenthood timing among young adults. Therefore, the first aim of this paper is to explore whether parenthood timing of children of criminal parents differ from that of children of non-criminal parents.

If parental offending influences the timing of entry into parenthood of their children, it is likely that its influence is gendered. Having children is more age-constrained for women than for men (Billari et al., 2011) and delayed romantic union formation for women might more often than for men result in childlessness. If on the other hand – as Huschek and Bijleveld (2015) indicated – having a criminal background leads to more social exclusion for men, we would expect sons of criminal parents to more often postpone parenthood or stay childless. Therefore, we will examine whether the influence of parental criminality on the timing of entry into parenthood differs between men and women.

Finally, this paper will pay attention to some of the key pathways linking parental criminality and their children's parenthood timing. Obviously, as children of criminal parents are at an increased risk to commit crime themselves (Besemer & Farrington, 2012; Besemer, Farrington, & Bijleveld, 2013; Van de Rakt, Murray, & Nieuwbeerta, 2012), and as it is possible that it is not so much their parents' offending but their own offending that impacts their parenthood chances, their own criminal behaviour constitutes a key pathway linking parental criminality and their children's entry into parenthood. In addition, given that children of criminal parents may be more likely to enter into a union at an early age (Huschek & Bijleveld, 2015), and given the strong link between marriage and parenthood (Aassve et al., 2006), marriage timing may also be an important pathway linking parental criminality and children's entry into parenthood. Fig. 1 summarizes these possible pathways.

To summarize, this article will investigate the impact of parental offending on the timing of entry into parenthood among their children, taking into account relevant pathways such as marriage and juvenile delinquency. We will first assess whether the timing of entry into parenthood of children of offenders differ from those of children of non-offenders. Next, we will add variables such as marriage and juvenile delinquency to the model. We investigate effects separately by gender. To study these

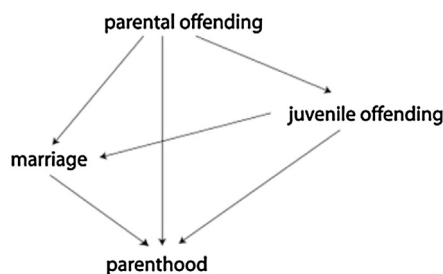


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of the relationship between parental offending and children's parenthood outcomes.

relationships, we use data from a unique Dutch five-generation study of descendants of adolescents at risk of juvenile delinquency.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Understanding the link between parental criminality and the timing of offspring parenthood

There are multiple mechanisms that link parental criminality to the timing of entry into parenthood of their children, and although we will not be able to empirically test all of these mechanisms, it is important to point them out. First of all, growing up in a criminal family can influence children's preferences with regard to childbearing. If criminal parents are more likely than others to have children early (Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant, & Lovegrove, 2009), or to have many children, such preferences can be transmitted to their children (Murphy & Knudsen, 2002; Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009; Steenhof & Liefbroer, 2008). There are several reasons to expect a focus on early childbearing among criminal families. Given the often insecure socio-economic status of criminal parents, they may be more inclined to invest in the 'quantity' of children, rather than in their 'quality', with an increased risk to have many children and to start early (Kaplan, 1996). Engagement in risky behaviours also is more likely among criminal parents (Krueger et al., 1994), making them more prone to have more children, and to have them early. But growing up in a criminal family may also negatively affect fertility attitudes, as children of criminal parents may be more susceptible to negative experiences with specific family members, or with family life in general, leading them to develop less of a 'taste' for family (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009), which could potentially reduce the number of children they want.

Second, growing up in a criminal family may also indirectly influence fertility behaviour by shaping attitudes towards issues related to sexuality, such as attitudes towards intercourse and contraception. Children of criminal parents may develop more permissive attitudes towards sexual intercourse as parents may not be strict in monitoring their children (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008), may have rather permissive attitudes themselves, or may exhibit sexual behaviours – like extra-marital affairs, strings of unstable relationships, etc. – that suggest permissive attitudes towards sexuality. These children may also develop negative attitudes towards contraceptive use, based on the views and behaviours of parents and members of the parental network (Bosompra, 2001; Brakefield, Wilson, & Donenberg, 2012; Valente, Watkins, Jato, VanderStraten, & Tsitsol, 1997).

Thirdly, criminal families are characterized by structural adversity, living in impoverished neighbourhoods, weak family bonds, ineffective parenting, drugs and alcohol abuse. This leads to children of criminal families having little social capital, and experiencing more problems forming prosocial bonds (Thornberry, 2005). Especially when these children interact with deviant peers, the likelihood of future offending is increased. As evidence for this, early delinquency has been identified as one of the most significant risk factors for becoming a teen father across major criminological studies (Thornberry et al., 2000). The mechanisms for boys and girls may not be similar. Girls who were raised in juvenile justice institutions have been reported (Van der Geest, Bijleveld & Verbruggen, 2013) to become mothers at very young ages (on average 21.6 years for the Netherlands), and at much younger ages than boys from criminal justice institutions (28.1 years).

Fourth, growing up in a criminal family may influence the actual opportunities for engaging in sexual relationships and for access to and use of contraceptives. With behavioural monitoring and consistency of discipline of children in criminal families low (Thornberry et al., 2003), there could also be little emphasis on

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