



Parental crime and the safety and survival of small children[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In this study the association between having a criminal parent and the safety and survival of small children is analysed. From the System of Social Statistical Datasets (SSD) hosted by Statistics Netherlands, we retrieve information on 10 complete birth cohorts (2000–2009; 1.9 million) of children and their parents. In the analyses we distinguish between hospital admissions/deaths for natural and external reasons and control for demographic and socioeconomic background variables. The effect of parental crimes on the probability that children get injured and receive hospital care, or die before they turn five years is estimated. Logistic regression modelling is applied, controlled for possible confounders. In addition, propensity score matching techniques are used to investigate whether there is a net crime effect and to minimize selection. The findings show that safety and survival only are at stake among highly selective deprived subgroups.

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1. Background

Parental influence on the welfare and well being of their offspring is evident (Elder, 1999). Children can develop higher goals like self-efficacy and social integration if they grow up in a safe and protected environment. Behaviours of parents can be supportive or stressful for their children; the living conditions they can offer may provide opportunities or pose restrictions (see Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, & Kim, 1999; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

If new parents commit a crime, especially a major or drugs-related crime, the living conditions of their small children are likely to be influenced negatively. Below, we will argue that parents who have committed crimes are likely to provide less comfort and care,

a less stable and protective environment than parents without a criminal past. This could lower the child's physical safety and may even negatively influence the child's chances of survival.

1.1. The consequences of parental crime for their offspring

There is much empirical evidence on the negative consequences of criminal behaviour of parents for their children. Children of offending parents are more often exposed to domestic violence (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007), which is related to children's maladjustment and future problem behaviour (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010). Childhood neglect, abuse and maltreatment strongly increase the probability that children will commit crimes as young adults (Currie & Tekin, 2012). Criminal behaviour as such is also often 'transferred' from parents to children (Hjalmarsson & Lindquist, 2012). Having a convicted parent is actually one of the strongest childhood predictors of the child's incarceration as an adult (Farrington, 2000). Parental incarceration is associated with family conflict and problems and delinquent behaviour of the children who are left behind (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010).

The prevalence of criminal behaviour is reported to be highest between the ages 18–22 (Hirschi & Laub, 2002; Stolzenberg & D'Allesio, 2008), and life course events like marriage, parenthood and employment are often 'turning points', away from crime, in the lives of young adults (Elder, 1985; Uggen, 2000). However, although recent work showed that male offenders who become fathers tend to 'better their lives', first parenthood did not change the criminal behaviour of female offenders (Zoutewelle-Terovan,

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Van der Geest, Liefbroer, & Bijleveld, 2014). Also, if men became fathers too young, their propensity to commit crimes actually increases (de Goede, Blokland, & Nieuwebeerta, 2011).

Parental crime is associated with neglect or child abuse. Criminal parents tend to have more personal problems and more stress in their lives. Being a parent often becomes stressful after the first joys of entering parenthood, and having small children dramatically alters new parents' lives. Individuals who commit many and/or violent crimes – often throughout their lives – have specific personality traits related to lower levels of self-control (Moffit, 1993; Hirschi & Laub, 2002). If parents have specific personality disorders that induce anti-social or even violent behaviour, this will on average be dysfunctional during their whole life course and for their offspring (see Johnson et al., 2000).

1.2. Crime or deprived living conditions?

Besides personality traits that stimulate anti-social behaviours, socio-economic circumstances can increase or decrease the likelihood that individuals turn to crime. The question is, therefore, whether crime itself or rather the crime-inducing life circumstances lead to the safety level of criminal parents' small children. Unemployment and a low household income are associated with a higher risk of individuals committing a crime (Aaltonen, Kivivuori, & Martikainen, 2015; Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Salmi & Kivivuori, 2006; Hirschi & Laub, 2002). Research has also shown that a parental low occupational and education level is strongly related to heightened risk for hospital admissions of children. In particular, low socio-economic status of an individual is associated with heightened risk for hospital admissions (Bosma, Traag, Berger-van Sijl, van Eijk, & Otten, 2011). The question arises, therefore, what is related more to the well-being of small children: crime as such or the deprived living conditions that have led to or have been generated by crime? In our analysis, we aim to investigate this question.

1.3. Numbers and types of crimes, injuries and deaths by external causes

We expect that on average, new parents who have committed crimes in the past will have certain personality traits and may provide socio-economically deprived living conditions that are dysfunctional for their small children. Parental crime is likely to increase the risk of children being left unattended, getting injured or finding themselves in a life threatening situation. That is why we also expect to find the largest effect if we focus on non-natural causes of injuries or death.

In order to investigate this, our data allows us to distinguish externally caused injuries among the total group of diagnoses of hospitalised small children, as well as deaths from external causes. To investigate this, we aim to test the effect of having a crime record (any offence) in general. However, it probably will matter how many and what kind of offences have been committed by the parent. In subsequent analyses we therefore focus on the number and the different types of offences. In addition, we distinguish two separate groups of deaths from external causes: intentional (i.e. drowning, traffic accidents, suffocating) and non-intentional (i.e. homicide) deaths.

1.4. Mothers and fathers

Most studies neglect the role of criminal mothers, mainly due to data limitations. Analyses are often restricted to the consequences of the father's actions for their sons. However, as mothers usually play a more central role in their families (Rosenthal, 1985) – to start with they simply are more present – criminal behaviour of mothers

may have even stronger negative consequences for their children. Furthermore, criminal mothers form a very select group as many more fathers than mothers get arrested. That is why we distinguish between fathers and mothers in our study.

2. Research questions

Parents are the gatekeepers to the safe and protective world, in which children can grow and prosper. It is possible that not only current but also past parental anti-social behaviour erodes this safe haven. This could be a general association or maybe one that only holds for very specific socio-economically deprived families. Given the lack of population based studies that can analyse small subgroups, we aim to answer the following research questions. Are parental offences and the safety and survival of small children associated? Does the association still hold if we control for deprived living conditions – determinants of criminal behaviour – of new parents? Do we find stronger associations if we focus on external injuries and (intentional and non-intentional) deaths?

3. Data

Data comes from the System of Social statistical Datasets (SSD) hosted by Statistic Netherlands. The SSD is an integrated, longitudinal database of numerous registers and surveys, containing the most important socioeconomic and socio-demographic variables – checked for consistency – of the entire population of the Netherlands (Arts, Bakker, & Van Lith, 2000; Bakker, Van Rooijen, & Van Toor, 2014). The SSD has data on all population members, including specific subgroups that are hard to capture with normal survey research. Data are currently available on the entire Dutch population from 1999 (socio-economic data) onwards. The demographic data go back to 1995 and the data on crime suspects in the SSD go back to 1996. Parental crime, accidents involving children and especially externally caused deaths are rare. In order to investigate the proposed association between these events, we need a large data set. We therefore selected 10 complete birth cohorts (2000–2009; 1.9 million) of children and linked them via the SSD parent-child register to their parents.

3.1. Parental offences

The police register the police records of all inhabitants of the Netherlands. When we use terms like 'committed a crime', 'crime suspect', or 'contact with the police' etc. we always mean that someone has a police record. The data provides not a complete picture of crime in the Netherlands. Firstly, police data suffer from the *dark number*. Then, data of the special investigation services (FIOD-ECD, Customs) are often not included so that various types of crimes such as economic crimes, environmental offences or benefit fraud, are underrepresented in the data. Also, we use data on crime suspects and not on convicted criminals, although about 75% of all suspects received a settlement from the district attorney (OM) or were found guilty by a judge. More than 95% of all registered suspects can be linked to the SSD. Suspects are sometimes not found in the SSD when their personal data are incomplete or incorrectly recorded or if the suspects are not registered in the Municipal Administration, for example, when it comes to foreign residents who were arrested in the Netherlands (CBS/WODC, 2013).

3.2. Hospital admissions

Hospital data are admissions requiring at least overnight admission to general and university hospitals as well as hospitals

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