

Effects of Criminal Parents on Children

Research Synthesis Paper: The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community

1. Risk of Becoming a Delinquent

In a longitudinal study of 394 families in England, David P. Farrington, professor of criminology at Cambridge University, found that approximately 4 percent of these families accrued almost half of the convictions of the entire sample.¹⁾ “The fact that delinquency is transmitted from one generation to the next is indisputable.... [F]ewer than 5 percent of the families accounted for almost half of the criminal convictions in the entire sample.... In order to achieve such concentration of crime in a small number of families, it is necessary that the parents and the brothers and sisters of offenders also be unusually likely to commit criminal acts.”

The findings for England, though dramatic and for a different culture and country, comport with the earlier U.S. research as summarized by Professor Kevin Wright of the State University of New York at Binghamton:

The Gluecks determined that delinquents were more likely than nondelinquents to have delinquent fathers and mothers. Subsequent studies supported the Gluecks' findings, observing that delinquent boys were more likely to have delinquent or criminal parents. In a study of the families of black delinquents in St. Louis, Robins found that a child's delinquent behavior was associated with 1) arrests of one or both of the parents in their adult years, and 2) a history of juvenile delinquency on the part of the parents. Children with two parents with criminal histories were at extremely high risk of delinquency.²⁾

Girls involved in crime tend to mate with (if not marry) men with criminal records.³⁾ Jill Leslie Rosenbaum of California State University, describing young delinquent women in her study, states: “[T]he men in the wards' lives bore a striking resemblance to the men chosen by their mothers. Many were significantly older than the girls and had criminal records.”⁴⁾

2. Violent Families in Violent Neighborhoods

Violent youth often come from violent parents. Violent youth are the most likely to have witnessed conflict and violence between their parents.⁵⁾ According to the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, in 2011 22 percent of children had witnessed violence in their homes, schools, and communities in the past year, and one in twelve children saw one family member assault another in the past year.⁶⁾ Children exposed to family violence are also the most likely to commit serious violent crime and to become “versatile” criminals – those engaged in a variety of crimes, including, theft, fraud, and drugs.⁷⁾ Among these youths, victims of violent crime are more likely to be perpetrators of violent crimes.⁸⁾ Physically or sexually abused boys commit the most violent offenses.

Internal family violence is only one major contributor to adolescent violence in these socially disorganized neighborhoods. The neighborhood itself (which includes the youth's violent peers, also

rooted in their own broken families) is the other powerful contributor,⁹⁾ especially to violent delinquency.¹⁰⁾

3. Rejection by Other Children

For most normal children, going to school is their first serious step into the broader community. But for future delinquents, this first experience pushes them further down the spiral toward delinquency and crime. Because of their family experiences, these children already are aggressive and hostile.¹¹⁾ Normal, emotionally attached children avoid them – in effect isolating and rejecting them. As a result, they seek compatible company elsewhere, in a group where they feel they belong.

As Ronald Simons, professor of sociology at Iowa State University, writes, “Ineffective parents produce aggressive first graders who are rejected by their peers and as a consequence must form friendships with other deviant youth.”¹²⁾ Likewise, Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center says: “Poor social skills, characterized by aversive or coercive interaction styles, lead directly to rejection by normal peers.”¹³⁾ Patterson, the leading expert in this area, also makes the point that peer rejection tends to be linked to ineffective parenting: “Specifically, early parent failures contribute to later skills deficits.... Parent skills in solving family problems correlate significantly with measures of academic skill and peer relations.”¹⁴⁾ In a study of 1,224 grade school boys, James D. Roff, professor of psychology at Eastern Michigan University, concludes that the boy at highest risk of becoming delinquent “was characterized by aggressive behavior in the context of peer rejection.”¹⁵⁾

Closed off from the community of their peers, future criminals search out companions who feel comfortable with them. Not surprisingly, these companions are similarly aggressive-hostile children with whom they feel at ease and by whom they are accepted. The group thus reinforces its own aggressive-hostile ways and gradually rejects the conventional ways of normally attached children.¹⁶⁾ Continued disruption at home, parents' continued use of harsh discipline,¹⁷⁾ and the continued absence of a father all add to the growing hostility of these future delinquents. Association with delinquent peers – almost all of whom come from similar family and parental backgrounds – is the next significant development on the path to habitual crime.¹⁸⁾

¹⁾ “The fact that delinquency is transmitted from one generation to another is indisputable”; West and Farrington, *The Delinquent Way of Life: Third Report of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, p. 109., quoted in Cindy L. Hanson, S.W. Henggeler, W.F. Haeefele, and J.D. Rodic, “The Demographic, Individual and Family Relationship Correlates of Serious and Repeated Crime Among Adolescents and Their Siblings,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 52 (1984), pp. 528-538.

²⁾ Kevin N. Wright and Karen E. Wright, “Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker’s Guide to the Literature,” prepared under interagency agreement between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1992.

³⁾ D.J. West, *Delinquency: Its Roots, Careers and Prospects* (London: Heimann, 1982).

⁴⁾ Jill L. Rosenbaum, “Family Dysfunction and Female Delinquency,” *Crime and Delinquency* 35 (1989): 31-44.

⁵⁾ Candace Kruttschmitt, Linda Heath, and David A. Ward, “Family Violence, Television View Habits and Other Adolescent Experiences Related to Violent Criminal Behavior,” *Criminology*, Vol. 24 (1986), pp. 235-267.

⁶⁾ Child Trends, “Children's exposure to violence” (2013). Available at

<http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=childrens-exposure-to-violence>.

⁷⁾ Margolin, G., & Elana B. G., "Children's exposure to violence in the family and community" *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13, no.4 (2004), 152-155.

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Ormrod, R., Hamby, S., & Kracke, K., "Children's exposure to violence: A comprehensive national survey," U.S. Department of Justice (2009) Available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/227744.pdf>.

⁸⁾ Madeline Wordes and Michell Nunez, "Out vulnerable teenagers: Their victimization, its consequences, and directions for prevention and intervention," *National Council on Crime and Delinquency* (2002).

Scott W. Menard, *Short and Long-Term Consequences of Adolescent Victimization*, US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2002).

⁹⁾ Patrick F. Fagan, "The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community," The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #1026 on Crime. Available at

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1995/03/bg1026nbsp-the-real-root-causes-of-violent-crime>
Chris Knoester and Dana L. Haynie, "Community Context, Social Integration into Family, and Youth Violence," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, No 3. (August 2005): 767-780.

¹⁰⁾ D. Wayne Osgood and Jeff M. Chambers, "Social Disorganization Outside the Metropolis: An Analysis of Rural Youth Violence," *Criminology* 38, No. 1 (2000): 81-115.

Elliott et al., *The Dynamics of Deviant Behavior: A National Survey Progress Report*.

¹¹⁾ Dan Olweus, "Stability of Aggressive Reaction Patterns in Males: A Review," *Child Development*, Vol. 53 (1982), pp. 1431-1446.

L.R. Huesman, M.M. Lefkowitz, L.D. Eron, and Leopold O. Walder, "Stability of Aggression Over Time and Generations," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 20 (1984), pp. 1120-1134.

¹²⁾ Ronald Simons and Joan F. Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers and Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use," *Family Relations* (1989): 273-281.

¹³⁾ John M. Gottman and John T. Parkhurst, "A Developmental Theory of Friendship and Acquaintanceship Processes," *Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology*, 1987, cited in Gerald R. Patterson and Thomas J. Dishion, "Contributions of Families and Peers to Delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1985), pp. 63-79.

¹⁴⁾, ¹⁷⁾ Gerald R. Patterson and Thomas J. Dishion, "Contributions of Families and Peers to Delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1985), pp. 63-79.

¹⁵⁾ James D. Roff, "Identification of Boys at High Risk for Delinquency," *Psychological Reports* 58.2 (1986): 615-618. A three-step screening procedure identified, from a sample of 1,224 grade school boys, a subsample of 60 subjects at increased risk for delinquency. Peer status, childhood aggression, and predelinquent behaviors were used in a sequential set of predictive tables. Relative improvement over chance provided a measure of predictive efficiency.

¹⁶⁾ LeGrande Gardner and Donald J. Shoemaker, "Social Bonding and Delinquency: A Comparative Analysis," *Sociological Quarterly* (1989): 481-499.

¹⁸⁾ Gerald R. Patterson and Thomas J. Dishion, "Contributions of Families and Peers to Delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1985), pp. 63-79.

Ronald Simons and Joan F. Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers and Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use," *Family Relations* (1989): 273-281. For more details, see the series over 12 studies by Patterson and his colleagues since 1980 elucidating the dynamics and parameters of these behaviors and their consequences for the social development of the child.

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