

Effects of Maternal Attachment on Crime Rates

Research Synthesis Paper: [The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community](#)

1. Maternal Affection Develops Empathy

According to Professor Rolf Loeber of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine: "There is increasing evidence for an important critical period that occurs early in children's lives. At that time, youngsters' attachment to adult caretakers is formed. This helps them to learn prosocial skills and to unlearn any aggressive or acting out behaviors."¹⁾

2. Effects of Weak Maternal Attachment

The early experience of intense maternal affection is the basis for the development of a conscience and moral compassion for others.²⁾ If a child's emotional attachment to his mother is disrupted during the first few years, permanent harm can be done to his capacity for emotional attachment to others. He will be less able to trust others and throughout his life will stay more distant emotionally from others. Having many different caretakers during the first few years can lead to a loss of this sense of attachment for life and to antisocial behavior.³⁾ Separation from the mother, especially between six months and three years of age, can lead to long lasting negative effects on behavior and emotional development. Severe maternal deprivation is a critical ingredient of juvenile delinquency: As John Bowlby, the father of attachment research, puts it, "Theft, like rheumatic fever, is a disease of childhood, and, as in rheumatic fever, attacks in later life are frequently in the nature of recurrences."⁴⁾ A child's emotional attachment to his mother is powerful in other ways. For example, even after a period of juvenile delinquency, a young man's ability to become emotionally attached to his wife can make it possible for him to turn away from crime.⁵⁾ This capacity is rooted in the very early attachment to his mother. We also know that a weak marital attachment resulting in separation or divorce accompanies a continuing life of crime.⁶⁾

3. Causes of Weak Maternal Attachment

Many family conditions can weaken a mother's attachment to her young child. Perhaps the mother herself is an emotionally unattached person.⁷⁾ The mother could be so lacking in family and emotional support that she cannot fill the emotional needs of the child. She could return to work, or be forced to return to work, too soon after the birth of her child. Or, while she is at work, there could be a change in the personnel responsible for the child's day care. The more prevalent these conditions, the less likely a child will be securely attached to his mother and the more likely he will be hostile and aggressive.⁸⁾

The mother's relationship with her children during this early period is also relevant to the debate over

child care. According to Professor James Q. Wilson of the University of California at Los Angeles, the extended absence of a working mother from her child during the early critical stages of the child's emotional development increases the risk of delinquency.⁹⁾ Specifically, say Stephen Cernkovich and Peggy Giordano, "maternal employment affects behavior indirectly, through such factors as lack of supervision, loss of direct control, and attenuation of close relationships."¹⁰⁾ Thus, forcing a young single mother to return to work too soon after the birth of her baby is bad public policy.

¹⁾ Rolf Loeber, "Development and Risk Factors of Juvenile Antisocial Behavior and Delinquency," *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 10 (1990), pp. 1-41.

²⁾ Jay Belsky "The Effects of Infant Day Care Reconsidered," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 3 (1988), pp. 235-272. On the vital connection between family and moral capacity, Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime," summarizes the findings of the professional literature as follows:

"Ainsworth suggested that children seek and accept the parent's guidance, further maintaining that secure children obey voluntarily from their own desire rather than from fear of reprisal."

"Arbuthnot et al. in an attempt to understand moral development and family relationships, suggested that dysfunctional families experiencing high levels of conflict, dominance, hostility, lack of warmth, and authoritarian disciplinary styles do not allow children to gain insight and understanding into how their misbehaving might cause hurt to others. Under these negative family conditions, children cannot develop conventional moral reasoning with roots in acceptance of mutual expectations, positive social intentions, belief in and maintenance of the social system and acceptance of motives which includes duties and respect. Based on their review of the literature, Arbuthnot concluded that nearly all studies utilizing moral assessment devices with acceptable psychometric properties have shown that delinquents tend to have lower moral reasoning maturity than non-delinquents."

"They argue that delinquency can be anticipated when children or adolescents are unable to see the perspective of others and lack empathy for other people's circumstances. When conformity to rules of behavior for the sake of order in society is not accepted, when property is only valued in its possession, when personal relationships, even life itself are valued only for their utility, then delinquency behavior should not be a surprise. Moral or normative development at a more advanced level may be necessary for young people to move beyond utility to moral justification for correct behavior. The young persons must develop a sense of moral justification to have the ability and commitment to act accordingly when faced with temptation, economic deprivation or intense peer group pressure.

³⁾ R.J. Cadoret and C. Cain, "Sex Differences in Predictors of Antisocial Behavior in Adoptees," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Vol. 37 (1980), pp. 1171-1175.

⁴⁾ Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994), Chapter 4, "Psychopaths in the Making."

⁵⁾ Robert J. Sampson and John L. Laub, "Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Saliency of Adult Social Bonds," *American Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 5 (1990), pp. 609-627.

⁶⁾ David P. Farrington, "Later Adult Life Outcomes of Offenders and Nonoffenders," in *Children at Risk: Assessment, Longitudinal Research and Intervention*, ed. Michael Brambling et al. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 220-244, cited in Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature."

⁷⁾ Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994). The research for the following statements is reviewed in this book, which is the most comprehensive and interestingly written overview of the attachment literature to date.

⁸⁾ Le Grande Gardner and Donald J. Shoemaker, "Social Bonding and Delinquency: A Comparative Analysis," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 30. No. 3 (1989), pp. 481-500.

⁹⁾ James Q. Wilson, *Crime and Public Policy* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press,

1983), chapter 4, pp. 53-68.

¹⁰⁾ Stephen A. Cernkovitch and Peggy C. Giordano, "Family Relationships and Delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1987), pp. 295-321

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