

# Effects of Family Structure on Female Crime Rates

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

The discussion of delinquency generally focuses on boys because most violent crime is committed by males. But while male and female delinquents have similar experiences, the quality of the intimate family relations of delinquent females often is much worse. They tend to be even less attached to, and to have more problems with, their mothers than do male delinquents. They are even more firmly rejected by their female school peers than are their male counterparts. And, in turn, they are even more firmly attached to their own "bad companions" – the delinquent peer group – than are males to theirs.<sup>1)</sup>

Professor Jill Rosenbaum of California State University paints a graphic picture of the early life of a female delinquent. The relationship between family breakdown or disintegration and later criminal status is dramatic: In 1980, records were requested on 240 women who had been committed to the California Youth Authority (CYA), the state agency for juvenile offenders. These records revealed:

**Family Structure:** Very few (seven percent) of these girls came from intact homes families. By the time these girls were 16, their mothers had been married an average of four times, and there was an average of 4.3 children per family.

**Family Criminality:** Seventy six percent of the girls came from families where there was a record of criminality.

**Family Violence:** Although much data on family violence are missing, it is evident that violence was present in many of these homes.

**Family Conflict:** In the two parent families (mainly step families) examined in this study a great deal of conflict was present. Of these parents, 71 percent fought regularly about the children. Since there were often his, hers and theirs present, the sources of conflict tended to result from one set of children having a bad influence on the others, the type of punishment invoked, or one particular child receiving too much attention. Conflict over the use of alcohol was present in 81 percent of the homes.

**Parent- Child Relationships:** A Poor relationship between parent and child is highly influential in the child's subsequent delinquency. Many of the girls received very little positive feedback from parents in the home. Of the fathers who were present, 53 percent were viewed by parole officers as rejecting of the girl, as were 47 percent of the mothers. Rejection came in many forms. The mothers appeared to be not only neglectful, but 96 percent were described as passive and 67 percent as irresponsible.

**Generational Cycles:** The mothers of the CYA wards tend to marry young, with 44% having had the ward by the time she was 18. These daughters tended to follow in their mothers' footsteps and begin bearing children at an early age. Parents often encouraged this behavior. One mother explained to her daughter's parole officer that she was happy to hear that her 15-year-old daughter was pregnant – "That is what women are supposed to do." The 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.

**The Mothers:** The wards' mothers did not have the supports or resources needed to cope with their environments. They often were socially isolated and distrusted those attempting to help. They viewed welfare workers as those trying to take away funds and social workers as trying to take away their children. These attitudes and fears began long before the wards were born perhaps even before their mothers were born. The mothers of the CYA girls did not know how to be mothers, for they were often children themselves when their children were born, and lacked the emotional resources to instill a sense of trust and security necessary for self-esteem and growth. Over time, just trying to survive depleted whatever emotional resources they might once have had.<sup>2)</sup>

1)

Jeffrey Fagan and Edward Pabon, "Contributions of Delinquency and Substance Use to School Dropout Among Inner-City Youths," *Youth & Society*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1990), pp. 306-354.

2)

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

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