

Effects of Parents on Crime Rates

1. Role of Fathers

The [absence of the father](#) is the single most important cause of crime.¹⁾ In fact, boys who are fatherless from birth are three times as likely to go to jail as peers from intact families, while boys whose fathers do not leave until they are 10 to 14 years old are two times as likely to go to jail as their peers from intact families.²⁾ According to Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, children without a father are more than twice as likely to be arrested for a juvenile crime and are three times more likely to go to jail by the time they reach age 30 than are [children raised in intact families](#).³⁾ Adolescents who had a positive relationship with their fathers are less likely to be arrested, belong to a gang, damage property, steal, or run away compared to their peers with less positive relationships with their fathers.⁴⁾ Along with the increased probability of family poverty and heightened risk of delinquency, a father's absence is associated with a host of other social problems. The three most prominent effects are lower intellectual development, higher levels of illegitimate parenting in the teenage years, and higher levels of welfare dependency.⁵⁾ According to a 1990 report from the Department of Justice, more often than not, missing and "throwaway" children come from [single-parent families](#), families with step parents, and cohabiting-adult families.

2. Role of Mothers

The early experience of intense [maternal affection](#) is the basis for the development of a conscience and moral compassion for others.⁶⁾ According to Chuck Smith, a Kansas State University child development expert, "as a child grows and matures, the mother—whether biological or a stepmother—plays an important role in her child's development, character and attitudes."⁷⁾ If a child's [emotional attachment](#) to their mother is disrupted during the first few years, permanent harm can be done to the child's capacity for emotional attachment to others. The child will be less able to trust others and throughout his or her 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.⁸⁾ 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."⁹⁾ A child's emotional attachment to their 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.¹⁰⁾ 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.¹¹⁾

Many family conditions can weaken a mother's attachment to her young child. Perhaps the mother herself struggles with emotional detachment.¹²⁾ 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 their mother and the more likely they will

be hostile and aggressive.¹³⁾

3. Effects of Parental Fighting

The empirical evidence shows that, for a growing child, the happiest, [safest](#), and most tranquil family situation is the intact primary marriage.¹⁴⁾ But even within intact two-parent families, serious parental conflict has bad effects. The famous studies of Harvard professors Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1950s found that one-third of delinquent boys in their sample came from homes with spouse abuse. The Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study observed that the incidence of delinquent behavior was higher in intact homes characterized by a high degree of conflict and neglect than it was in broken homes without conflict.¹⁵⁾ As this and other studies have shown, the lack of emotional attachment to parents is more strongly related to delinquency than is an intact home.¹⁶⁾ Professor Kevin N. Wright, in his review of the literature for the Department of Justice, lists 21 other major studies that clearly show the link between parental conflict and delinquency.¹⁷⁾ The lesson is clear: conflict between parents hurts the child. The more frequent or intense the conflict, the more the child is hurt emotionally. Violence within families not only increases the likelihood that children in those families will engage in [disruptive behaviors](#) but also that they will reflect that [abuse](#) on their spouse and children when they are older.¹⁸⁾

4. Effects of Parental Breakup

In 2008, there were over 8 million divorced adults in the United States.¹⁹⁾ [Breakup of a child's parents' marriage](#) during the first five years of their life places a child at high risk of becoming a juvenile delinquent.²⁰⁾ This breakup – through either divorce or separation – is most likely to occur three to four years after marriage. Therefore, a large proportion of very young children experience the emotional pain of the early and final stages of marital dissolution at a time when they are most vulnerable to disruptions in their emotional attachment to their parents.²¹⁾ This instability continues to impact adolescents as they mature. Teens in blended or divorced families tend to have more [behavioral problems](#), like using tobacco, binge drinking, weapon carrying, physical fighting, or sexual activity.²²⁾

Conflict within “step families” (families where at least one of the married parents is not the biological parent of all the children) also has serious effects. According to the California Youth Authority study of [female delinquents](#), conducted by Jill Leslie Rosenbaum, professor of criminology at California State University, “In the two parent 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.”²³⁾

Rates of conflict are much higher outside intact married families.²⁴⁾ The rates of emotional and behavioral problems of children are more than double in step families.²⁵⁾ Given their impact on children, the marriage arrangements of parents have significant effects on the incidence of teenage crime.

5. Influence of Criminal Parents

(See [Effects of Criminal Parents on Children](#))

Violent youth often come from violent parents. In 2007, over 1.5 million children had a father in prison, and over 147,000 children had a mother in prison.²⁶⁾ Violent youth are the most likely to have witnessed conflict and violence between their parents.²⁷⁾ They also are the most likely to commit a serious violent crime and to become “versatile” criminals – those engaged in a variety of crimes, including, theft, fraud, and drugs.²⁸⁾ Among these youths, [physically or sexually abused](#) boys commit the most violent offenses.²⁹⁾

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,³⁰⁾ especially to violent delinquency,³¹⁾ and its culture of aggression and violence is imported into the school.

6. Quality of Parenting

As a child's emotional attachment to his parents ensures a well-adjusted adult,³²⁾ so parental rejection of the child has powerful opposite effects. Ronald Simons, professor of sociology at Iowa State University, summarizes the research findings: “Rejected children tend to distrust and attribute malevolent motives to others, with the result being a defensive, if not aggressive, approach to peer interactions.... Such [rejecting] parents not only fail to model and reinforce prosocial behavior, they actually provide training in aggressive noncompliant behavior.”³³⁾

Rejection by the family, which is the child's first and fundamental “community,” sets the stage for another social tragedy. Rejected children tend gradually to drop out of normal community life. Professor Simons continues: “Parental rejection... increased the probability of a youth's involvement in a deviant peer group, reliance upon an avoidant coping style, and use of substances.”³⁴⁾ Many other studies in the professional literature replicate these findings.³⁵⁾ Bonding between children and parents is critical to helping protect against youth violence.³⁶⁾

¹⁾ 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.

See reference to Ann Goetting, “Patterns of Homicide Among Children,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 1 (1989): 31-44.

²⁾ Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, “Father Absence and Youth Incarceration,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14, (2004): 369-397.

³⁾ Robert Rector, “Marriage: America’s Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty,” *The Heritage Foundation* (September 16, 2010). Available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/marriage-america-s-greatest-weapon-against-child-poverty> Accessed July 7, 2015.

⁴⁾ Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Kristin A. Moore, “The Father-Child Relationship, Parenting Styles, and Adolescent Risk Behaviors in Intact Families,” *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 6 (June 2006): 850-881.

⁵⁾ For a more comprehensive overview of the professional literature on the relationship between illegitimacy and these negative social phenomena, see Fagan, “Rising Illegitimacy, America’s Social

Catastrophe.”

⁶⁾ Jay Belsky “The Effects of Infant Day Care Reconsidered,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 3, (1988): 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.”

“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.”

⁷⁾ Charles Smith, “A Powerful Connection: Mother-Child Bond Plays Role in Child’s Growth, Development,” *Kansas State University* (May 6, 2011). Available at <https://www.k-state.edu/media/newsreleases/may11/motherchild50611.html>. Accessed June 22, 2001.

⁸⁾ R.J. Cadoret and C. Cain, “Sex Differences in Predictors of Antisocial Behavior in Adoptees,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 37, (1980): 1171-1175.

⁹⁾ Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994), chapter 4.

¹⁰⁾ Robert J. Sampson and John L. Laub, “Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds,” *American Sociological Quarterly* 5, (1990): 609-627.

Larry Siegel and Brandon Welsh, *Juvenile Delinquency: Theory, Practice, and Law*, (Stamford: Cengage Learning 2014), 217.

¹¹⁾ David P. Farrington, “Later Adult Life Outcomes of Offenders and Nonoffenders,” in *Children at Risk: Assessment, Longitudinal Research and Intervention*, ed. Michael Brambring et al. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 220-244, cited in Wright and Wright, “Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker’s Guide to the Literature.”

¹²⁾ Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached*. 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.

¹³⁾ Le Grande Gardner and Donald J. Shoemaker, “Social Bonding and Delinquency: A Comparative Analysis,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1989): 481-500.

¹⁴⁾ A primary marriage is one in which both husband and wife are in their first marriage.

Melinda Yexley, Iris Borowsky and Marjorie Ireland, “Correlation Between Different Experiences of Intrafamilial Physical Violence and Violent Adolescent Behavior,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 17, (2002): 707-720.

¹⁵⁾ Cited in Van Voorhis et al. “The Impact of Family Structure and Quality on Delinquency: A Comparative Assessment of Structural and Functional Factors.”

¹⁶⁾ Travis Hirschi, *Causes of Delinquency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

- ¹⁷⁾ Wright and Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature," 11.
- ¹⁸⁾ Richard E. Heyman and Amy M. Smith, "Do Child Abuse and Interparental Violence Lead to Adulthood Family Violence?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 4 (November 2002): 864-870. Alexandra Loukas, "Developmental Trajectories of Disruptive Behavior Problems Among Sons of Alcoholics: Effects of Parent Psychopathology, Family Conflict, and Child Undercontrol," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 112, no. 1 (2003): 119-131.
- ¹⁹⁾ US National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States, and National Vital Statistics Report, Table 78. <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0078.pdf>.
- ²⁰⁾ Rolf Loeber, "Development and Risk Factors of Juvenile Antisocial Behavior and Delinquency," *Clinical Psychology Review* 10, (1990): 1-41.; Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, "Family Factors as Correlates and Predictors of Juvenile Conduct Problems and Delinquency," in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, ed. M. Tonry and N. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 7, 29-149.
- ²¹⁾ David P. Farrington, "Later Adult Life Outcomes of Offenders and Nonoffenders," in *Children at Risk: Assessment, Longitudinal Research and Intervention*, ed. Michael Brambring et al. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 220-244
- ²²⁾ Kathleen B. Rodgers and Hillary A. Rose, "Risk and Resiliency Factors Among Adolescents Who Experience Marital Transitions," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 4 (November 2002): 1024-1037.
- ²³⁾ Jill L. Rosenbaum, "Family Dysfunction and Female Delinquency," *Crime and Delinquency* 35, (1989): 31-44.
- ²⁴⁾ Carolyn Wolf Harlow, "Female Victims of Violent Crime" (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1991).
- ²⁵⁾ Nicholas Zill and Charlotte A. Schoenborn, "Developmental Learning and Emotional Problems: Health of Our Nation's Children, United States, 1988," in *Advance Data from the Vital and Health Statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics* no. 190, (November 1990). "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Fact Sheet," *National Healthy Marriage Resource Center* (February 2009).
- ²⁶⁾ Lauren Glaze and Laura Maruschak, *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008).
- ²⁷⁾ Candace Kruttschmitt, Linda Heath, and David A. Ward, "Family Violence, Television View Habits and Other Adolescent Experiences Related to Violent Criminal Behavior," *Criminology* 24, (1986): 235-267.
- ²⁸⁾ Rolf Loeber, "Development and Risk Factors of Juvenile Antisocial Behavior and Delinquency," *Clinical Psychology Review* 10, (1990): 1-41.
- ²⁹⁾ Cathy Spatz Widom, "Child Abuse, Neglect, and Violent Criminal Behavior," *Criminology* 27, no. 2 (1989): 251-271; Dorothy Lewis et al. "Toward a Theory of the Genesis of Violence: A Follow-up Study of Delinquents," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 28, no. 3 (1989): 431-436; Fagan and Wexler "Family Origins of Violent Delinquents"; DiLalla et al., "Aggression and Delinquency: Family and Environmental Factors."
- ³⁰⁾ See "Stage Two, Community Experience Leading to Crime #3: The Growth of the Gang," supra.
- ³¹⁾ Elliott et al., *The Dynamics of Deviant Behavior: A National Survey Progress Report*.
- ³²⁾ For a full and interesting development of this point, see Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994).
- ³³⁾ Simons and Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers, and Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use," See also Phyllis T. Howing, J.S. Wodarski, P.D. Kurtz, J.M. Gaudin, and E. Neligan Herbst, "Child Abuse and Delinquency: The Empirical and Theoretical Links," *Social Work* (May 1990): 244-249, 245.
- ³⁴⁾ Ronald L. Simons and Joan F. Robertson, "The Impact of Parenting Factors, Deviant Peers, and

Coping Style Upon Adolescent Drug Use," *Family Relations* 38, (1989): 273-281.

³⁵⁾ See Ronald L. Simons et al., "The Nature of the Association Between Parental Rejection and Delinquent Behavior," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 18, no. 3 (1989): 297-310.

³⁶⁾ 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.

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