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.\(^{36}\)


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.”

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.”


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


This entry draws heavily from *The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community*.