

Does getting married reduce the likelihood of criminality?

Criminologists suggest that a child who grows up in a dysfunctional family may learn antisocial behaviour, may not be taught how to control unacceptable behaviour and may not be supervised enough to prevent association with antisocial peers. As a result, the child (in theory) becomes inadequately socialized and unable to keep his or her behaviour within socially accepted boundaries.

*Considering the importance of early family life, it seems logical that later family life might also be associated with the likelihood of adult criminality. Popular belief suggests that marriage and parenthood provide people with a **social investment** in conforming to societal norms and, therefore, act as informal behaviour controls. The role of husband/father or wife/mother are simply viewed as incompatible with a criminal lifestyle.*

Recent research has also indicated that people are more concerned about losing their family's respect than about being arrested or imprisoned. It has been suggested, therefore, that family relations may play a more significant role than criminal sanctions in deterring crime. This obviously has great implications for correctional policy makers. If marriage and parenthood reduce the likelihood of criminal offending, family supports may become the preferred strategy for attacking crime and recidivism rates.

This article reviews the research literature that analyzes the possibility that marriage and/or parenthood reduce the likelihood of criminality. The article looks at research on the impact of adult family life on both the onset of criminal offending and subsequent criminality. Marriage and criminality Early research in this area tried to determine the impact of marriage on criminality by comparing groups of convicted offenders with non-offenders. Results were, however, inconsistent and mixed.

For example, a 1977 study⁽¹⁾ reported that early marriage did not produce a significant reduction in subsequent criminality. In fact, offenders who were married before age 21 were significantly more likely to have a conviction record.

The study did reveal, however, that delinquent fathers whose wives did not have a criminal record had lower recidivism rates after marriage than similar fathers who married women with a criminal record. Further, while marriage did not appear to reduce the likelihood of further criminal or delinquent behaviour, it did reduce some of the habits commonly associated with delinquency (drinking, sexual promiscuity and drug use).

Other studies were also unable to uncover a definite link between marriage or parenthood and the likelihood of adult crime. For example, one study concluded that the degree of social integration (including marital status) had only limited usefulness in predicting adult criminality, while another found that although dropping out of school and unemployment were related to subsequent criminal behaviour, marital status was not. Longitudinal research Few longitudinal (long-term) studies have examined the impact of marriage or parenthood on criminal behaviour. Several studies have, however, attempted to demonstrate that social bonds to adult institutions (including the family) determine criminal behaviour over an individual's life.

For example, a 1982 study⁽²⁾ found that male offenders were more likely than non-offenders to marry female offenders and it was speculated that the "restraining" effect of marriage would be largely nullified in offender-offender marriages. It was concluded that marriage has a less frequent (than expected) restraining effect on delinquents because of the tendency of male delinquents to marry women who are also socially delinquent.

However, this and other longitudinal studies were unable to pinpoint a causal relationship between marriage and criminality. Even where results suggested that marriage or parenthood might affect criminality, the connection was ambiguous - marriage increases social stability, but men probably marry as they enter more stable periods of their lives.

A 1989 longitudinal study⁽³⁾ therefore looked more specifically at the quality of relationships. The study found that male offenders and non-offenders did not differ in the proportion living with a woman. However, about twice as many of the offenders had been divorced or separated (at least once) by age 32. Offenders were also much more likely (than non-offenders) not to get along with their wife or companion and were significantly more likely to have struck their partner.

This suggests that marriage, in and of itself, does not intervene in a criminal lifestyle, but that the ability to sustain marriage may predict abstinence from crime.

Along these ones, a 1990 study⁽⁴⁾ began to clarify how marriage might affect an individual's propensity for criminality. Rather than using marital status, the researchers created an "attachment to spouse" measure to gauge the quality of relationships and attitudes about marital responsibility and family cohesion.

The study revealed that attachment to a spouse in young adulthood was associated with a significant and substantial reduction in adult antisocial behaviour. This led to the conclusion that social bonds to adult institutions exert a powerful influence on adult crime. Family life and recidivism A number of studies have indicated that strong offender-family relationships are beneficial to offenders. This general belief has been instrumental in the development of offender programming such as family visiting, family counselling and early parole.

A 1954 study⁽⁵⁾ was one of the first attempts to substantiate this connection. The study used an "index of family interest" to test whether offenders on conditional release with close family ties were more successful than offenders without such ties. The study revealed that 75% of those classified as maintaining "active" family interest while in prison were successful on conditional release, compared with a 34% success rate for those characterized as "loners."

As well, a 1983 study⁽⁶⁾ found that offenders tend to become disenchanted with the criminal lifestyles of their youth and develop a desire for fundamental life changes. More than 25% of the study sample indicated that the establishment of a mutually satisfying relationship with a woman was critical to the change process. Still, the study failed to clarify which came first, the move to conformity or the establishment of family ties. What does it all mean? So far, no set of findings has clearly confirmed that marriage and parenthood reduce the likelihood of criminality. Most studies have found no significant

differences in marital status between offender and non-offender groups.

Research **has** found that offenders, while no less likely to be married (or in a significant relationship) than non-offenders, are more likely to divorce or separate, to not get along with their spouses and to be involved in violent relationships. This suggests that marriage and parenthood do not act as transitional "life change" points. Rather, offenders appear to be attracted to more deviant relationships and spouses just as they are to deviant behaviour.

Research examining the **quality** of marital relationships has, however, uncovered an association with criminality. Attachment to spouse was found to be associated with a decrease in the likelihood of adult criminality. The maintenance of an active family interest while incarcerated and the establishment of a mutually satisfying relationship after release were also associated with recidivism decreases.

What remains unclear is whether marriage and family life assist offenders and high-risk individuals in making a transition to a more conventional lifestyle or whether, with age, offenders simply make the shift to a conventional lifestyle and gain a greater appreciation for family life.

The research seems to suggest that the relationship may be reciprocal. A good marital relationship may help an ex-offender remain crime free. However, an individual's drift back into a deviant lifestyle tends to create friction within their marriage and reduces any support for a non-criminal lifestyle that may have been available.

Clearly, much remains to be learned about whether adult family life can alter a criminal career and buffer adults from criminogenic influences. But, while far from fully clarifying the causal relationship between family life and criminality, the research suggests a link that may justify action to strengthen families.

Adapted from K. N. Wright and K. E. Wright, "Does Getting Married Reduce the Likelihood of Criminality? A Review of the Literature," *Federal Probation*, LVI, 3 (1992): 50-56

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