

# Case need domain: “Marital and family”

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**T**his article reviews the research on marital and family variables as they relate to adult criminal recidivism. Recidivism studies have examined an array of marital and family variables ranging from family size and birth order to family tension and quality of parent–child relationships. The literature review was organized according to family psychopathology, attachment and parent–child relationship, childhood abuse, family structure and birth order, and marital relationship. Despite methodological flaws, the evidence suggests that maintaining healthy family relations may reduce recidivism.

**C**riminality is viewed as a complex phenomenon involving multiple biological, sociological, psychological and situational antecedents.<sup>2</sup> There is substantial evidence that a wide range of demographic, family and individual factors are correlated with patterns of criminal activity. Consequently, predicting criminality or even understanding fully its antecedents has been an enormous challenge for correctional workers, forensic scientists and clinicians.

Issues related to the probability of recidivism have been a matter of both practical and scientific concern for many years. Although it remains unclear whether factors explaining the onset of offending are the same as those accounting for the continuation or termination of the adult criminal career, comparatively few studies have examined these issues.

Popular belief suggests that family ties, employment, marriage, children and holding other social bonds within the community mitigate criminal behaviour by providing people with a social investment in conformity. Further, growing evidence supports the

hypothesis that factors such as negative-quality parent–child relationships, familial criminality, parental illness and separation from parents increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency and adult criminality.

## Methodology

A thorough search identified existing publications of adult criminal recidivism. For this study, all available data was extracted from automated databases such as PsychInfo, HealthGate, Medline and the National Criminal Justice Reference System. Key search terms included criminal recidivism

and family, crime and family, crime and marriage, crime and prevalence of family problems, family variables and crime, and family assessment instruments.

A total of 238 studies were reviewed for their theoretical and methodological applications, as well as for the empirical results. Of these, 193 were empirical studies and 35 were classified as theoretical. The majority of the studies (n=149) examined samples of 100 or more recidivists. The most common sampling method was that of convenience (n=148).

More than half of the recidivism studies did not include a contrast group (n=132). Sixty-six studies were retrospective, 38 were longitudinal and 19 were retrospective-longitudinal studies. Multivariate analyses were the highest level of statistical analysis for 65 of the studies, while frequencies and structural

equation modelling were the highest level in 25 studies.

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## Family psychopathology

It is not unreasonable to expect that some biological predisposition toward antisocial behavior may characterize serious recidivistic and violent criminal offenders. One study examined the contribution of mental disorder in the biological backgrounds of adoptees. Multiple recidivistic nonviolent criminal behavior was found at a significantly elevated rate in adopted sons when mental disorder and criminal involvement were characteristic of the adoptees' biological families. A similar, but nonsignificant, elevation was found for rates of violence. Parental diagnostic types associated most strongly with sons' later criminal involvement were drug abuse, alcohol abuse and personality disorders.

Parental psychoses were not related to offspring recidivism or violence in this cohort. The study also took into account possible confounding effects of missing data, institutionalization prior to adoption, information given to adoptive parents by the adoption agencies about the child's biological background, historical period, perinatal factors and selective placement.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, a recent meta-analysis confirmed the presence of a relationship between family criminality and general recidivism among adult offenders.<sup>4</sup> However, the individual contributions attributable to biological predisposition versus environmental influence could not be ascertained.

## Parent-child relationship

Predictions of adult criminality based on knowledge of the parent-child relationship have been useful in understanding the role of development and familial variables in recidivism. Specifically, it has been suggested that the absence of early secure attachment to parents may predispose individuals to a life of delinquency and repeated criminal behaviour. One study reported a highly significant interaction between delivery complications and early child rejection in predicting violence,

suggesting that those who experienced both birth complications and early child rejection were most likely to become violent offenders in adulthood. The interaction between birth complications and early child rejection was again significant when comparing violent criminals with noncriminals.<sup>5</sup>

Further research suggests that inappropriate discipline, negative parental supervision, attachment to parent and runaway behaviour are predictive of adult criminal conduct.<sup>6</sup> A recent meta-analysis also confirmed that family rearing practices (i.e., lack of supervision and affection, conflict, and abuse) were predictive of recidivism.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, there is some evidence to suggest that early paternal influences are stronger than maternal influences in fostering violent criminality.<sup>8</sup>

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## Experience of childhood abuse

The experience of childhood physical and sexual abuse within or outside the family is often related to the quality of parent-child relationships. A prevalent clinical assumption regarding both adult and adolescent sex offenders is that many have been sexually abused as children. There is some evidence to support this assumption, particularly in regard to sexual offences perpetrated against male children. A recent study found that 75% of adolescent offenders who ever assaulted a male child reported sexual abuse, in comparison with

only 25% of those who assaulted female children, peers or adults.<sup>9</sup> Other research suggests a link between childhood sexual abuse and later drug abuse, juvenile delinquency and criminal behaviour.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, a recent meta-analysis involving sexual offenders reported no relationship between childhood sexual abuse and sexual recidivism.<sup>11</sup> In sum, the evidence that supports the "violence breeds violence" hypothesis should be interpreted cautiously given the weak methodological rigour typically associated with this area of research.<sup>12</sup>

## Family structure and birth order

Research that has investigated the relationship between family structure (size or birth order) and recidivism has generally produced inconclusive findings. Some researchers have concluded that number of siblings is not related to recidivism<sup>13</sup> and others have found support for the predictive relationship between family size or birth order and criminal recidivism. For example, number of older sisters has been found to be related to both number of prior incarcerations and number of months of incarceration.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, some evidence indicates that there is a relationship between extreme ordinal positions (i.e., firstborns and lastborns) and criminal behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, further research is required.

## Marital relationship

Several longitudinal studies have carefully examined childhood familial experiences in relation to adult criminal lifestyles, but few have examined life events such as marriage and parenthood and their impact on criminal behaviour. Despite some inconsistent findings, a recent review that examined the relationship between marriage and criminality reported that attachment to a spouse was associated with a decrease in the likelihood of adult criminality. Maintaining an active family interest while incarcerated and establishing a mutually satisfying relationship after release were associated with decreases in subsequent reoffending.<sup>16</sup> As well, a recent meta-analysis involving sexual offenders revealed that being single was associated with sexual recidivism.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusions

Although numerous demographic and psychosocial variables have been studied as potential predictors of criminal recidivism

among adults, measures of past behaviour appear to be among the most stable predictors of future violence and criminality. However, various family factors have also been implicated. Some of these include family psychopathology, quality of parent–child relationships, experiences of childhood victimization, and marital status and quality of relationship. Much remains to be learned about whether adult family life can alter a delinquent’s criminal career and can buffer criminogenic influences in adulthood.

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Much of the research has been methodologically flawed, fragmentary, descriptive and correlational. Only in the last decade have multivariate statistical approaches been applied to a comprehensive array of variables. It is recommended that sophisticated multivariate techniques be applied in future research. Clearly, future research could be directed toward articulation of the combined role of demographic, family and individual variables among subgroups of the heterogeneous criminal population. This information could then serve as the basis for designing effective prevention and intervention programs.

Among already-convicted and institutionalized adult offenders, establishing and maintaining healthy family relations may help reduce recidivism. In both community and institutional settings, it is recommended that mental health and correctional

professionals endeavour to provide opportunities for regular, positive offender–family interactions. For many offenders, this may mean treatment for self as well as for the family subsystem (i.e., parents, close relatives and intimate partner). Although far from elucidating the causal relationship between family life and adult criminality, the existing research justifies action that strengthens family interaction. ■

- <sup>1</sup> P.O. Box 31, Suite 1250, 605-5 Avenue S.W., Calgary, Alberta T2P 3H5.
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- <sup>3</sup> T. E. Moffitt, "Parental mental disorder and offspring criminal behavior."
- <sup>4</sup> P. Gendreau, T. Little and C. Goggin, "A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works!" *Criminology*, 34 (1996): 575-607.
- <sup>5</sup> A. Raine, P. Brennan and S. A. Mednick, "Birth complications combined with early maternal rejection at age 1 year predispose to violent crime at age 18 years," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 51 (1994): 984-988.
- <sup>6</sup> K. Chockalingam, "Recidivism among adult offenders," *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, XLIV, 1 (1983): 81-86. See also M. Le Blanc, "Family, school, delinquency and criminality, the predictive power of an elaborated social control theory for males," *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 4 (1994): 101-117.
- <sup>7</sup> Gendreau, Little and Goggin, "A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works!"
- <sup>8</sup> A. Yates, L. E. Beutler and M. Crago, "Characteristics of young, violent offenders," *The Journal of Psychiatry and Law*, 11 (1983): 137-149.
- <sup>9</sup> J. R. Worling, "Sexual abuse histories of adolescent male sex offenders: Differences on the basis of the age and gender of their victims," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 104, 4 (1995): 610-613.
- <sup>10</sup> A. W. Burgess, C. R. Hartman and A. McCormack, "Abused to abuser: Antecedents of socially deviant behaviors," *Annual Progress in Child Psychiatry and Child Development*, 20 (1987): 601-614.
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- <sup>12</sup> C. S. Widom, "The cycle of violence," *Science*, 244 (1989): 160-166.
- <sup>13</sup> H. H. Hart and S. Axelrad, "The only-child delinquent contrasted with delinquents in large families," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 32 (1941): 42-66.
- <sup>14</sup> A. M. Horton and L. J. Whitesell, "Prediction of recidivism by sex and number of siblings," *Psychological Reports*, 45 (1979): 98.
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- <sup>16</sup> K. N. Wright and K. E. Wright, "Does getting married reduce the likelihood of criminality? A review of the literature," *Federal Probation* (September 1992): 50-56.
- <sup>17</sup> R. K. Hanson and M. T. Bussière, "Predicting relapse."

## Coming up in *Forum on Corrections Research*

*The January 1999 issue of FORUM will present various themes:*

*"Family Violence," "Sex Offenders" and "Staff Safety."*

## Coming up in the May 1999 issue of *Forum on Corrections Research*

*The May 1999 issue of FORUM will focus on "Youthful Offenders."*

*Suggested themes of upcoming issues include: "Managing Women Offenders" and "Aboriginal Offenders."*