



## **The concentration of offenders in families, and family criminality in the prediction of boys' delinquency**

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The main aims of this study were to investigate inter-relationships among offending by three generations of relatives (fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers) and the concentration of offending in families. This study also investigates how far criminal relatives predict a boy's delinquency. The parents of 1395 Pittsburgh boys aged 8, 11 or 14 reported arrests by all relatives. Parent reports of boys' arrests predicted their later referrals to juvenile court, demonstrating predictive validity. Offenders were highly concentrated in families; if one relative had been arrested, there was a high likelihood that another relative had also been arrested. Arrests of relatives were compared with arrests of the boy, court petitions of the boy, and the boy's reported delinquency (according to the parent, boy and teacher). Arrests of brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers all predicted the boy's delinquency. The most important relative was the father; arrests of the father predicted the boy's delinquency independently of all other arrested relatives. Studies of explanatory variables suggested that having a young mother, living in a bad neighbourhood, and low guilt of the boy may be links in the causal chain between arrested fathers and delinquent boys.

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### **Introduction**

This study has two main aims. The first is to investigate inter-relationships among offending by three generations of relatives (fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers), and the concentration of offenders in families. The second aim is to investigate how far criminal relatives predict a boy's own delinquency. The analyses use data collected in the Pittsburgh Youth Study, which is a prospective longitudinal survey of three samples of 500 boys first contacted at ages 7, 10 and 13.

The fact that crime runs in families has been known for many years (Dugdale, 1887). One of the earliest major British investigations was conducted by Ferguson (1952), who carried out a cross-sectional comparison of delinquents versus non-delinquents. This study of 1349 Glasgow boys who left school at the age of 14 found that 12 per cent were convicted (mostly for theft and burglary) up to the age of 18. Interestingly, Ferguson was able to demonstrate that the percentage of boys who were convicted increased dramatically with the number of other convicted family members, from 9 per cent (no other family member convicted) to 15 per cent (one), 30 per cent (two) and 44 per cent (three or more other family members convicted). The probability of conviction was especially high among those boys who had convicted fathers (24%), convicted older brothers (33%) or convicted younger brothers (38%).

Ferguson (1952) was also able to demonstrate that having a convicted family member predicted a boy's likelihood of delinquency independently of other factors known to be

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associated with crime, such as poor housing, an overcrowded household and the boy's low school attainment. Numerous other correlates of delinquency were also examined, including a boy's small height and poor school performance (which were strongly related to delinquency), broken families and the father's occupational prestige (weakly related) and working mothers (not related). This led Ferguson (1952, p. 67) to conclude that "the influence of another convicted member of the family is at least as great as that of any of the other adverse factors that have been studied."

More recent British studies also show that crime runs in families. Wilson (1987) investigated 120 intact Birmingham families, each with at least four children, including two boys (an average of six children per family). Almost half the families (47%) contained at least one convicted parent. The majority of convicted mothers (60%) were living with convicted fathers, but only 20 per cent of convicted fathers were living with convicted mothers. In the 56 families with a convicted parent, 45 per cent of 180 sons were convicted or cautioned, compared with only 19 per cent of the 203 sons in the remaining 64 families.

The most extensive British studies of the concentration of offending in families were carried out in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which is a prospective longitudinal survey of 411 South London boys from age 8 to age 46 (Farrington *et al.*, 1975, 1998; West and Farrington, 1977; Farrington, 1995). The most recent analyses showed that a convicted father, mother, brother or sister predicted a boy's own convictions (Farrington *et al.*, 1996b). All four relatives were independently important as predictors. Same-sex relationships were stronger than opposite-sex relationships, and older siblings were stronger predictors than younger siblings.

For example, 63 per cent of boys with convicted fathers were themselves convicted, compared to 30 per cent of boys with unconvicted fathers, yielding an odds ratio (OR) of 3.9. Basically, the OR indicates the increase in risk associated with a risk factor. As a rule of thumb, an OR of 2.0 or greater, indicating a doubling of the risk, shows a strong relationship (Cohen, 1996). ORs are not affected by the prevalence of explanatory or outcome variables and are more realistic measures of strength of relationships than are correlations (Fleiss, 1981; Farrington and Loeber, 2000).

Convicted mothers were somewhat less strongly related to convictions of boys (OR=2.8) than were convicted fathers. Convicted older brothers (OR=4.3) were somewhat more strongly related than were convicted younger brothers (OR=3.4), and convicted older sisters (OR=4.1) were much more strongly related than were convicted younger sisters (OR=1.9). The association between convictions of the boy and convictions of his wife was particularly striking. Of males with convicted wives, 83 per cent were themselves convicted, compared to 35 per cent of boys with unconvicted wives (OR=9.3).

Similarly, there was a strong relationship between convicted fathers and convicted mothers. Of fathers married to convicted mothers, 61 per cent were themselves convicted, compared to 23 per cent of fathers married to unconvicted mothers (OR=5.4). Also, convicted brothers tended to coincide with convicted sisters (OR=5.2). Convicted mothers were more likely to have convicted daughters (OR=6.4) than convicted sons (OR=1.9), and conversely convicted fathers were more likely to have convicted sons (OR=4.0) than convicted daughters (OR=2.6).

On examining the concentration of offending in families, it was found that a small number of families accounted for a disproportionate number of offences. For example, four families (1% of families), containing 33 persons, totalled 448 convictions (18% of all convictions). Adding the next four most criminally prolific families, eight families (2% of families),

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