



How far does the apple fall from the tree? Maternal delinquency and sex-specific patterns of offspring delinquent behavior



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Examine whether parental offending is directly associated with male and female offspring patterns of delinquent behavior during adolescence and indirectly associated with risk for criminal conviction in young adulthood.

Methods: Latent growth curve models and growth mixture models are estimated using intergenerational data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the effects of maternal offending on rates of growth and distinct trajectories of delinquent behavior in male and female children.

Results: The results revealed that maternal offending was associated with higher starting levels and slower rates of decline in delinquent behavior in male and female children. Growth mixture modeling, however, revealed that a four-class solution explained patterns of delinquency in male offspring, while a three-class solution explained patterns of delinquency in female offspring. Multivariate analyses indicated that maternal offending was more strongly associated with male offending classes than female offending classes, with males in the high and slowly declining class and moderate and increasing class demonstrating the highest risk for criminal conviction in young adulthood.

Conclusions: Maternal offending is more strongly associated with serious patterns of delinquent behavior and risk for future criminal conviction in male offspring than in female offspring.

There is a vast and growing body of literature examining the intergenerational transmission of criminal offending (van de Weijer, Augustyn, & Besemer, 2017). Early research on this topic can be traced back to the late 19th century where Richard Louis Dugdale (1887) found that criminal behavior was heavily concentrated within a singular family—the Jukes. Contemporary research has begun to analyze intergenerational linkages across several different families from culturally different populations using sophisticated methodologies. Findings from this body of research thus far has shown that crime tends to cluster within families and is transmitted through generational lines (Beaver, 2013; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001; Farrington, Ttofi, & Crago, 2017; Frisell, Lichtenstein, & Långström, 2011; Junger, Greene, Schipper, Hesper, & Estourgie, 2013; Mednick, Gabrielli Jr, & Hutchings, 1984). Results indicate, for instance, that children with a criminal parent are two-to-three times more likely to be arrested, convicted of a crime, or sentenced to probation or incarceration (Beaver, 2013; Farrington et al., 2001, 2017). Considered together,

the concentration and transmission of crime appears to be an important source of influence in the development of criminal and delinquent behavior.

While a great deal of research has reported positive associations between parent and child criminality, much of this work is limited in three key ways. First, research has focused almost exclusively on the intergenerational transmission of criminal convictions for male offspring. Given that a large body of evidence suggests that the etiological factors for male offending may be somewhat different than for female offending (Choy, Raine, Venables, & Farrington, 2017; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005), it is important to examine if parental crime is a universal risk factor for both male and female children. Second, prior research has generally used official records to measure criminal behavior which may underestimate the true prevalence of offending in both parents and children. This is particularly relevant for the examination of female offending, which is typically less serious and frequent. Third, to the best

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of our knowledge, no research has used large-scale intergenerational data to prospectively examine the association between parental delinquency reported during adolescence and developmental patterns of male and female delinquent behavior during the same life-course period. Indeed, *Thornberry (2009)* has recommended that intergenerational research should follow children prospectively during the same age as their parents to allow for a more accurate estimation of the strength of intergenerational transmission for antisocial behavior. The present study aims to begin to address these methodological and theoretical gaps in the existing literature.

1. The intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior

The observation of familial similarity in criminal behavior is well documented (*Beaver, 2013; Rowe & Farrington, 1997; van de Weijer et al., 2017*). An extensive line of research from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (*Farrington, Piquero, & Jennings, 2013*), for example, has shown that children of convicted parents have a higher risk of criminal conviction themselves (*Besemer & Farrington, 2012; Farrington, Barnes, & Lambert, 1996; Farrington, Coid, & Murray, 2009; Rowe & Farrington, 1997; Smith & Farrington, 2004*). A recent study by *Farrington et al. (2017)* reported that male offspring of convicted fathers and mothers were significantly more likely to be criminally convicted even after controlling for a range of environmental and psychological confounds including residential renting, high unemployment, low income, antiestablishment attitudes, poor housing, large family size, and physical punishment. Other studies analyzing nationally representative data on youth from the United States (*Beaver, 2013*) and total population data on citizens living in Sweden from 1973 to 2004 (*Frisell et al., 2011*) report strong familial aggregation of contact with the criminal justice system and criminal conviction.

While a great deal of work has focused on the study of intergenerational continuity and discontinuity for criminal justice processing, relatively less has focused on examining the linkages between parental offending during the earlier stages of the life course and developmental patterns of delinquent behavior in their male and female offspring during the same time period. This gap in the literature is largely due to the use of retrospective official reports of parental offending and a reliance on data limited to male offspring. Using a more inclusive measure of parental offending and analyzing population-based data with information on both male and female offspring can lead to a better understanding of whether parental delinquent behavior influences developmental patterns of male and female antisocial behavior. This is particularly critical to contemporary intergenerational research since no study to date has used prospective data from a large sample to examine this question and evidence from prior research has demonstrated that the causes (*Vaske, Wright, Boisvert, & Beaver, 2011*) and developmental patterns (*Moffitt & Caspi, 2001*) of delinquent behavior for males and females may be different.

2. Sex differences in delinquent behavior during adolescence

One of the most consistent findings from criminological research is that offending is more common among males than females (*Archer, 2004; Choy et al., 2017; Heimer, Lauritsen, & Lynch, 2009; Rohner, 1976; Schwartz, Steffensmeier, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2005*). Even though research suggests a narrowing of the gender gap in nonlethal violence in recent years (*Lauritsen, Heimer, & Lynch, 2009*), significant sex differences in offending are pervasive, persisting across time, geographic space, cultures, and distinct sources of data (*Archer, 2004; Heimer et al., 2009; Rohner, 1976; Schwartz et al., 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2005*). Considering the criminological consensus that males and females differ in their delinquent involvement, scholars have begun to examine sex differences in trajectories of offending and antisocial behavior (*Broidy et al., 2015*). Research has revealed that males, by and large, are more likely to

exhibit serious, chronic, and life-course-persistent offending trajectories than females (*Broidy et al., 2015; D'unger, Land, & McCall, 2002; Miller et al., 2010; Odgers et al., 2008*). In contrast, females are more likely to exhibit trajectories that are adolescence-limited (e.g., later onset with shorter duration) or that render them non-problematic offenders (*D'unger et al., 2002; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Miller et al., 2010*). Relatedly, research has also indicated that a large portion of early-onset offenders are also male, with the onset of offending behaviors of delinquent girls occurring almost uniformly during adolescence (*Silverthorn, Frick, & Reynolds, 2001*). Regardless of the exact delinquent trajectory exhibited during childhood and adolescence, trajectory membership predicts subsequent social and psychological adjustment among both males and females (*Miller et al., 2010*). To be precise, more severe, chronic groups tend to evince the worst developmental outcomes (*Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002; Odgers et al., 2008*). Thus, it is generally well established that life-course-persistent offending trajectories tend to diminish life chances to a greater degree than adolescence-limited offending (*Moffitt et al., 2002; Odgers et al., 2008*) and that, relative to females, males are at greater risk of life-course-persistent offending trajectories, characterized by the early-onset and persistence of chronic and serious offending (*Broidy et al., 2015; D'unger et al., 2002; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Miller et al., 2010; Odgers et al., 2008*).

Less frequently examined, however, is whether parental offending is equally predictive of these delinquent trajectories for males and females. Even so, recent research has begun to examine this question and report that parental offending, particularly maternal offending, may be more consequential for problem and delinquent behaviors in males than females (*Lahey et al., 2006; Kim, Capaldi, Pears, Kerr, & Owen, 2009; van Meurs et al., 2009; Rhule, McMahon, & Spieker, 2004*). To illustrate, one study of 93 adolescent mothers and their children revealed that childhood conduct problems are directly predicted by maternal antisocial behavior for male children (*Rhule et al., 2004*). In the case of female children, maternal antisocial behavior predicted poor parenting practices, but not conduct problems among female children (*Rhule et al., 2004*). Another study of 206 young men, their intimate partners, and their children indicated that, while the influence of fathers' externalizing behaviors on their sons was quite limited, male children's problem and externalizing behaviors were significantly predicted by maternal problem behaviors (*Kim et al., 2009*).

Studies employing larger samples, also appear to confirm these sex differences for adolescent delinquency. For example, *van Muers and colleagues (2009)* found that parental delinquent behavior transmission was stronger in mothers than in fathers, and in sons than in daughters. Thus, the influence of parental delinquency on child delinquency was stronger when the parent was female and the child was male (i.e., from mothers to sons). Despite the results being generally supportive of sex differences, one study of a sample of 625 adjudicated delinquents in San Diego County suggested that parental history of antisocial behavior was equally common among male and female adolescent offenders, with no evidence that parental offending history was more consequential for male or female offspring (*McCabe, Lansing, Garland, & Hough, 2002*). Nevertheless, very little research has employed extensive life-course data to examine the intergenerational linkages between maternal offending and male and female patterns of delinquency during adolescence. Results from this line of research has the potential to shed new light on the influence of maternal offending on distinct trajectories of male and female delinquency during adolescence and the potential risk for future contact with the criminal justice system.

3. The current study

The current study is designed to build on the literature on the intergenerational transmission of delinquent offending for males and females in four key ways. First, we examine the effect of maternal delinquency during adolescence on within-individual rates of change in

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