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## Using three-group propensity score method to estimate effects of relationship status and quality on men's antisocial behavior

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To test the associations between cohabitation/marriage and men's antisocial behavior, and the moderating effect of relationship quality on these associations with a contemporary nationally representative sample. **Methods:** Data was drawn from a nationally representative sample, including men who were married ( $n = 1996$ ) or cohabiting ( $n = 1067$ ) and who were single ( $n = 2789$ ). Three-group propensity score weighting was used to balance pre-existing characteristics and to test the effect of marriage and cohabitation on antisocial behavior at Wave 4. Internal moderator analysis was used to test the moderating effect of relationship quality.

**Results:** Marriage and cohabitation were associated with 48% and 26% reductions in antisocial behavior. Relationship quality conditioned the marriage and cohabitation effects. Men in higher quality marriages engaged in less antisocial behavior than men in lower quality marriages, but married men overall engaged in less antisocial behavior than single men. In contrast, only men in high quality cohabiting relationships committed less antisocial behavior than single men.

**Conclusions:** The effect of romantic relationship in reducing crime is contingent upon the type of union and the relationship quality. Research is needed to explore the mechanisms of the combined effect of relationship status and quality.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Cohabitation and men's antisocial behavior

In the past few decades, America has witnessed significant changes in relationship patterns and marriage formation. The median age at first marriage has risen from 24.7 years for men and 22.0 years for women in 1980 to 29.5 years for men and 27.4 years for women in 2016 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2016a). As an alternative form or a precursor to marriage, more and more young people are cohabiting (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). The number of cohabiting, unmarried partners increased dramatically in the past three decades (Wilcox, Knight, Chalfin, & Roman, 2010), and from 2009 to 2016 alone, it increased from 6 million to over 8 million (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011, 2016b).

This significant change in relationship patterns is relevant to research that seeks to identify “turning points” that promote men's desistance from antisocial behavior. This literature shows that married men display lower levels of antisocial behavior than unmarried men (King, Massoglia, & Macmillan, 2007; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998;

Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006). Does cohabitation, as either a precursor of or substitute for marriage also promote desistance from antisocial behavior? This question has become increasingly relevant.

The literature on the association between cohabitation and antisocial behavior is small and results have been mixed. Using a subsample ( $N = 52$ ) of offenders who were born around the Great Depression, Sampson et al. (2006) revealed that men engaged in less crime during periods when they were cohabiting than when they were single, but cohabitation was a very rare occurrence in this sample (in any given year only 3% of participants were in cohabiting relationships on average). In a study of Finnish felons who were neither married, cohabiting, nor in employment at the start of the study, those who were in cohabiting relationships 5 years later had accrued fewer convictions than men who were still single (Savolainen, 2009). However, this study did not make any statistical adjustments to account for the fact that men whose relationship status differed by the end of the study might have systematically differed in other ways that could account for their criminal behavior. Moreover, the temporal ordering of criminal behavior and relationship status was unclear, given that men could have

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been convicted at any point in the 5 years they were studied, but relationship status was only measured at the end of the 5 years.

In contrast to the findings showing that cohabitation is associated with reductions in antisocial behavior, another study found that convicted offenders in the United States engaged in more crimes over a 3 year period when they were cohabiting than when they were single (Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995), as did a sample of parolees in the United States who were followed prospectively over 7 years (Piquero, MacDonald, & Parker, 2002). One other study of young adults who engaged in above-average rates of delinquency prior to the start of the study found that those who were in cohabiting relationships engaged in as much offending as those who were single (Lonardo, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2010) while a second study found that men committed certain kinds of offenses less often when they were in cohabiting relationships versus when they were single, but this effect depended on the quality of the relationship and not always in predictable ways (Forrest, 2014). Studies on cohabitation and drug use generally revealed no association (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006; Forrest & Hay, 2011; Giordano, Seffrin, Manning, & Longmore, 2011; Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007; see Siennick, Stewart, & Staff, 2014 for beneficial effect of cohabitation on reduction in substance use). In summary, the literature on cohabitation is small and findings are mixed as to whether cohabitation leads to reductions in antisocial behavior.

The literature on marriage offers a number of explanations for why cohabiting with a partner should lead to reductions in men's antisocial behavior. For example, both marriage and cohabitation could be expected to produce changes in men's daily routines by increasing obligations to the family and thereby reducing time spent affiliating with antisocial peers, as predicted by routine activities theory (Maume, Ousey, & Beaver, 2005; Osgood & Lee, 1993; Warr, 1998). Moreover, marrying or cohabiting with a partner may accelerate cognitive transformations in men's identities and reduce the perceived value of an antisocial lifestyle, as predicted by cognitive transformation theory (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). Finally, although Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded informal social control theory expanded on social bond theory (Hirschi, 1969) to highlight the importance of attachments to social institutions (e.g., schools, marriage, employment) across the life course, the institution of marriage was hypothesized to promote attachment to a spouse, increasing feelings of affection and respect, such that men would be less likely to engage in antisocial behavior for fear of incurring disapproval or jeopardizing the marriage. Although lacking the institutional status of marriage, cohabitation may also promote bonds with a partner that motivate men to abandon antisocial lifestyles.

Despite these potential similarities, marriage and cohabitation differ in important ways that would lead to the prediction that cohabitation would be more weakly associated with men's antisocial behavior than marriage. Although both marriage and cohabitation are romantic relationships in which couples share a residence, they are qualitatively different from each other in terms of their legal status and their social meanings and norms (Nock, 1995; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007). First, marriage, unlike cohabitation, is a formal institution and both its formation and termination require significant legal effort. Second, marriage, unlike cohabitation, is often accompanied by certain rituals like a wedding ceremony and a honeymoon that mark the transition from one life-stage to the next (Cherlin, 2004). Marriage is also a socially meaningful event through which individuals construct their personal identity and life meaning (Bulcroft, Bulcroft, Bradley, & Simpson, 2000). Thus, marriage, as compared to cohabitation, carries substantial symbolic and social meaning. Third, marriage and cohabitation differ in their social patterning, which refers to the social roles married and cohabiting couples inhabit and the social regulation of married and cohabiting couples (Nock, 1995). For example, married couples are perceived differently by parents, peers, and employers than cohabiting couples are (Nock, 2005), there is stronger disapproval when adultery is

committed in the context of a marriage versus a cohabiting relationship (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), and, despite the lack of complete consensus in American society, the social roles for husbands and wives are still clearer than the social roles for cohabiting partners. Because marriage and cohabitation involve different social processes and meanings due to the institutionalization of partnerships, they may differ in their effect on reducing men's antisocial behavior.

### 1.2. Relationship quality as a moderator

Not only do marriages and cohabitations differ in terms of their institutional status, but they also differ in quality. Men and women in cohabiting relationships report lower levels of commitment to the relationship and describe their relationships as less affectionate, trusting, and satisfactory than married couples do (Brown & Kawamura, 2010; Nock, 1995; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). To the extent that men in cohabiting relationships are less committed and attached to their partners than married men are, this could explain why they are more like single men (in terms of their antisocial behavior) than married men. Nevertheless, cohabitations are heterogeneous (Brown, 2003; Thornton et al., 2007) and some men may be highly committed to and satisfied with their relationships. Despite weak overall associations between cohabitation and antisocial behavior, these cohabiting men who report high levels of relationship quality may engage in much lower rates of antisocial behavior than single men do.

Given that marriage and cohabitation have a different institutional status, we argue that it is important to examine relationship quality in the context of relationship type. As compared to the large number of studies testing the marital status effect, < 20 studies have tested whether relationship quality predicts desistance from antisocial behavior or moderates the effect of relationship status (see Skardhamar, Savolainen, Aase, & Lyngstad, 2015 for a review). Among the existing studies, several examined the role of relationship quality irrespective of the status of the union (i.e., married, cohabiting or dating) and revealed that men in higher quality relationships engaged in less antisocial behavior (Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2008; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). Very few studies have explicitly tested whether relationship quality moderates effects of marriage or cohabitation on antisocial behavior. We review the studies that examined relationship quality in the context of different relationship statuses below.

#### 1.2.1. Relationship quality as a moderator of the marriage effect

Using data from a longitudinal study in which boys who were at high risk of offending were followed from childhood into adulthood, Laub et al. (1998) showed that the beneficial effects of marriage were only found when men were in high quality marriages. In a follow-up of the same sample, Sampson et al. (2006) found that marital quality had a significant beneficial impact on reducing men's antisocial behavior. Maume et al. (2005) revealed that among marijuana users who entered marriage when they were in their late teens and early twenties between 1980 and 1983, only those who reported high levels of attachment to their spouse stopped using marijuana. A similar protective effect of marital quality in the desistance process was found in a community sample (Massoglia & Uggen, 2007). In a study of ex-prisoners who were married or living as married with a partner, men's reports of closeness in the relationship were unrelated to their criminal offending (although reports of closeness were associated with less illegal drug use) (Visher, Knight, Chalfin, & Roman, 2009). Recently, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 and a fixed effects model to control for enduring individual characteristics, Forrest (2014) found that only marriages characterized by moderate and/or high quality had an effect on limiting men's violent and property-related crimes.

#### 1.2.2. Relationship quality as a moderator of the cohabitation effect

The only study to our knowledge that measured quality specifically in the context of cohabiting relationships (Forrest, 2014) did not reveal

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