

Intergenerational transmission of crime



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In our society, it is generally assumed that crime 'runs in the family'. For a long time, the scientific basis for this assumption was limited. However, a growing number of multigenerational studies have been set up in recent decades, mainly in the United Kingdom, United States, the Netherlands and Sweden, which have made it possible to investigate the intergenerational transmission of crime. These studies are important to establish the degree of transmission and to investigate potentially effective interventions in families at risk.

Concentration of crime within families

The results from the Dutch Transfive study, in which the criminal behaviour of five successive generations from 198 high-risk families was measured, revealed that crime is strongly concentrated within families. Within the Transfive study, 80% of the offences was committed by just 20% of the families ↗. Similar concentrations within families were also discovered in British ↗ and American datasets ↗. When specific types of offences were examined, violence was found to be particularly strongly concentrated within families: half of all violent offences were committed by just 5% of the families. For non-violent offences, the concentration within families is quite a bit smaller ↗. In addition, sex offences were also found to be concentrated within families from the Transfive study ↗.

Like father like son

Furthermore, it was discovered that between all five generations of the Transfive study crime was transmitted from father to son: men with a criminal father have a

1.4 to 2.3 times higher odds of becoming a criminal in comparison to men who do not have a criminal father ↗. Similar significant relationships between the criminal behaviour of the father and the son have also been demonstrated without exception in other intergenerational studies in the Netherlands, England, the United States and Sweden.¹ If only violent offences are examined, the degree of transmission is found to be even higher: in the Transfive study, sons with violent fathers were found to have a 2.3 to 3.4 times higher odds of being sentenced for a violent offence themselves ↗.

A similar transmission of violent crimes also emerged in a study among the entire Swedish population ↗. The results with respect to the transfer from mothers and/or to daughters were less unequivocal within the Transfive study ↗. On the other hand, a Swedish population study revealed that the links between criminality of female family members were considerably stronger than those between male family members ↗. In addition, British research revealed that the transmission of crime was stronger between family members of the same sex than between male and female family members ↗.

Possible explanations

Scientific literature contains evidence for various mechanisms that can explain this intergenerational transmission of crime. For example, children can acquire criminal behaviour when they are exposed to the crime of the parent. Research has shown that the transmission of violence is less strong if the parents are divorced and the child may consequently be exposed less to the violence of the father ➡. Another possible explanation is that children of criminals are exposed to various risk factors for criminality (e.g. poverty, living in bad neighbourhoods) and therefore end up in the criminal world themselves. The evidence for biological influences has been demonstrated by various adoption and twin studies, which revealed that genetic factors explain about 50% of the differences in criminality and antisocial behaviour.² Finally, it might also be the case that the police and courts keep a better eye on criminal families and consequently the chances of children with criminal parents being sentenced is higher. In line with this mechanism, British research has demonstrated that children with the same level of self-reported delinquency have a greater chance of being sentenced by a court if one of their parents has ever been sentenced ➡.

References

- 1 For a complete overview and discussion of intergenerational studies see: Weijer, S.G.A. van de, Augustyn, M.B. & Besemer, S. (to be published shortly). Intergenerational Transmission of Crime: An International, Empirical Assessment. In: A.A.J. Blokland & Van der Geest (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Life-Course Criminology*.
- 2 See for an overview and discussion of these studies: Beaver, K. M. (2009). *Biosocial criminology: A primer*. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing.

Further reading

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