

## Chapter 2

# Marriage as an Intervention in the Lives of Criminal Offenders

Jessica M. Craig, Brie Diamond, and Alex R. Piquero

**Abstract** Criminology has long been interested in identifying evidence-based interventions that can help redirect criminal pathways. Although not within the purview of the criminal justice system, other nontraditional interventions have also emerged as generally effective desistance-promoting factors. One intervention in particular, marriage, is the focus of this chapter. Herein, we provide a brief overview of some of the main theoretical frameworks that have articulated a “marriage effect” of criminal desistance. Then, we provide a detailed review of the empirical literature assessing the relationship between marriage and crime. The chapter closes by offering summary conclusions as well as highlighting several directions for future research. Identifying the correlates of criminal desistance is important for theory—but is especially important for public policy (Laub and Sampson 2001). To the extent that aspects of offenders’ lives that influence continued offending can be identified and addressed, then evidence-based policies and programs can target at-risk offenders with the hope of helping to foster and/or aid in the desistance process (see Sherman et al. 2002).

One particular correlate that has received much theoretical and empirical attention, though not routinely considered a criminal-justice-applied intervention, is marriage. The relationship of marriage to criminal desistance has long been recognized in the criminological literature and resonates well with many criminological frameworks—especially control theories of crime that focus on the accumulated bonds that prevent persons from offending.

---

J.M. Craig • A.R. Piquero, Ph.D. (✉)  
University of Texas at Dallas, Program in Criminology, EPPS,  
800 W. Campbell Road, Richardson, TX 75080, USA  
e-mail: apiquero@utdallas.edu

B. Diamond  
Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, USA

This chapter provides a brief overview of some of the main theoretical frameworks that have articulated a “marriage effect” of criminal desistance. This is followed by a review of the empirical literature assessing the relationship between marriage and crime. Summary conclusions and directions for future research complete the chapter.

## 2.1 Theoretical Explanations of the Marriage Effect

Several theoretical frameworks attempt to explain the relationship between marriage and desistance from criminal behavior. Some of these consider marriage as a direct cause of criminal desistance, others see it as a prime example of selection effects, and some researchers maintain that the effect of marriage on crime desistance is indirect via the disruption of peer processes. After highlighting these various perspectives attention will turn to the empirical evidence on the marriage effect.

### 2.1.1 *Marriage and the Promotion of Desistance*

Sampson and Laub’s (1993) age-graded informal social control theory hypothesizes that marriage provides a catalyst for criminal desistance (see also Laub and Sampson 1993). Their age-graded theory of informal social control posits that certain events in adulthood, such as marriage, represent turning points in the life course that drive an individual away from criminal endeavors and toward conventional norms and behavior. Marriage represents a life event that “knives off” one’s delinquent past, provides monitoring and support for growth, alters routine activities, and transforms one’s personal identity (Laub and Sampson 2003, p. 148). Through the bonding of spouses, marriage advances a host of prosocial ties—to employment, conventional peers, and community involvement—that decrease one’s connection and stock in antisocial behavior. Through the transfer in routine activities, individuals spend less time with same-sex peers in crime-inducing situations and more time with spouses engaged in conventional activities (Laub and Sampson 2003).

Sampson and Laub proposed that the mere establishment of a marital bond was not the precise mechanism that triggered the desistance process. It is not simply marriage but the quality of that marriage that is the true catalyst for the termination of criminal behavior. A home rife with turmoil, deceit, and despair will hardly provide the bonds necessary to extinguish one’s desire for criminal endeavors—regardless of whether one’s spouse also has a delinquent history (Giordano et al. 2003; Sampson and Laub 1990, 1993). A strong attachment to a conventional spouse, however, increases access to conventional people and activities while raising the social stakes associated with misbehavior. Importantly, these effects do not occur immediately, but unfold over time as bonds strengthen to ultimately quell criminal involvement (Laub and Sampson 1993; Laub et al. 1998).

Simons et al. (2002) add to Sampson and Laub's thesis by introducing the process of assortative mating. Assortative mating is the idea that people choose romantic partners who are more like themselves—that opposites indeed do not attract, but sameness does (Collins 1988). Research shows that antisocial individuals tend to engage in romantic relationships with antisocial partners (Cairns and Cairns 1994; Rhule-Louie and McMahon 2007; Rowe and Farrington 1997; Simons et al. 1993, 2002). The implications of this concept for Sampson and Laub's theory, according to Simons et al. (2002), are that the orientation of a person's partner with regard to criminal behavior will be an important determinant in whether desistance occurs. Most antisocial individuals should marry antisocial partners and persist in their delinquent behavior, but through random occurrences some antisocial people will fall in love with and marry conventional spouses who will discourage criminal behavior and ignite the desistance process. Simons and colleagues provide evidence in support of assortative mating finding that antisocial behavior and antisocial peers in adolescence predict engaging in a relationship with an antisocial partner in adulthood. Further, they found that having an antisocial partner was predictive of continuity of offending into adulthood.

Importantly, Simons et al. (2002) highlight potentially key theoretical distinctions for the marriage effect across gender. They uncovered interesting gender differences in the influence of romantic partners on desistance. Having a conventional romantic partner was one of many factors that promoted desistance in women alongside job attachment and conventional peers in adulthood. However, for males the only factor that seemed to moderate the link between delinquency and adult criminal behavior was the presence of delinquent peers in adulthood. This study alludes to the possible need for theoretical distinctions in the marriage effect across gender (a position further espoused by Giordano et al. 2002). It may be, according to Simons et al. (2002), that for women the process outlined by Sampson and Laub (1993) holds true, but the relationship between marriage and desistance for males works through the changes in peers as suggested by Warr (1998, 2002).

### ***2.1.2 Marriage as a Selection Process***

Counter to the argument that marriage causes desistance from crime, theorists such as Hirschi and Gottfredson (1995) contend that this relationship is spurious. Consistent with their long-held view that enduring individual differences are responsible for all types of human behavior, they maintain that the marriage effect is simply capturing the natural aging out process (with regard to declines in crime) that occurs in most individuals with enough social capital and the personal interest to attract a spouse. In their view, marriage is an effect of those individuals who have naturally outgrown criminal behavior and who decide to conform to a conventional lifestyle. In support of their claim, Hirschi and Gottfredson find fault in Sampson and Laub's own qualitative follow-up interviews. The story of Leon, their primary example of the marriage effect, even alludes to the personal transformation that

occurred *prior* to his marriage at 17 years of age. Laub and Sampson (2003) report that he gave up drinking and gambling upon meeting the woman he would eventually marry—indicating a decision to leave behind his criminal lifestyle to pursue conventional endeavors. On the selection argument, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1995), (p. 137, emphasis in original) could not be clearer: “In fact, however, this process would merely account for the *apparently* good effects of good institutions.” (The decision to change was made prior to involvement with the “change-producing” institutions). The narratives reported by Sampson and Laub (1993) suggest as much. Former offenders say they “decided” to settle down, get a job, or get married before they actually did so. Control theory, unlike life-course theory, accepts the notion that “decisions precede actions.”

Consistent with the cognitive transformation framework advanced by Giordano et al. (2003); Hirschi and Gottfredson (1995) contend that a cognitive transformation occurs prior to securing a lifelong mate. The desisters in Giordano and colleagues’ study spoke of distancing themselves from delinquent peers and coming to view themselves as impervious to peer influence. Other research by Giordano and associates (Giordano et al. 2002) points to criminally involved individuals tired of the lifestyle entailed by crime choosing to settle down and attaching themselves to prosocial, crime-inhibiting mates. They contend that, for many, the combination of desiring to live an honest life and enjoining oneself in a noncriminal relationship appears to play a key role in the desistance process.

Laub and Sampson (2003) argue against the pure selection interpretation. Citing evidence that enduring individual differences such as intelligence, personality, and aggressiveness fail to predict desistance when marital factors are included, these theorists contend that marriage itself is overwhelmingly responsible for the cessation of criminal behavior. They argue that while selection effects may be occurring at some level, most marriages are the result of spontaneous interactions, or “fortuitous contacts” (p. 45), not conscious, sustained efforts at securing a conventional lifestyle. Further, they argue that the men in their sample explicitly state that marriage changed their lives; they talk about their wives controlling their behavior, pushing them into conventional organizations such as steady jobs or community clubs, and at times moving their residence away from their delinquent friends.

### ***2.1.3 Marriage and Peer Effects***

Others have argued that marriage may indeed have an effect on criminal desistance but that its effect may be explained by the influence marriage has on an individual’s access to crime-promoting factors. In this view, it is not the marriage per se that is responsible for desistance, but the barrier it creates between an individual and his delinquent peers that is the true cause for desistance. In contrast to Sampson and Laub’s (1993) control theory perspective, some view the marriage effect through the lenses of social learning theory. For example, Warr (1998) suggests that marriage reduces the amount of time an individual spends with peers, thus

limiting the opportunities for crime and the peer influence toward such behavior. When an individual enters into a marriage, he tends to be more closely tied to familial obligations. His spouse likely insists upon his nightly presence in the home, chastises his delinquent friends, and safeguards against their influence on her husband by limiting the amount of time spent in their presence. When an individual marries, he naturally spends more time engaged in family life and less time in the presence of friends, especially fellow offenders. In Warr's view "marriage acts to disrupt or dissolve friendships that existed prior to marriage, including relations with other offenders or accomplices" (Warr 1998, p. 188). At the same time, marriage promotes interaction with conventional peers, which bolsters the individual's movement toward desistance.

In short, there are at least three primary theoretical frameworks that identify a relationship between marriage and subsequent criminal desistance, and our review focused on those that have received the most theoretical and especially empirical attention. In the next section, we provide an in-depth overview of the empirical research that has examined the marriage effect on criminal desistance in contemporary criminological research.

## 2.2 Review of Empirical Research

### 2.2.1 *Inclusion Criteria*

To be included in the current review, studies had to explicitly measure marriage, not simply any romantic relationship, and to assess its effect independently of other social bonds. Thirty-one empirical studies were identified that have assessed the impact of marriage on crime. They were published between the years of 1993–2013 and include journal articles, book chapters, and books. A handful of studies combined subjects' data on marriage and full-time employment to measure overall stakes in conformity (e.g., Piquero et al. 2002). While such studies are relevant for assessing the combined impact of social bonds, they were not included because they did not solely investigate the marriage effect.

Due to space constraints, each study cannot be reviewed in depth; as such, we provide a summary of each study in Table 2.1. When reviewing the studies, each finding that approached or reached statistical significance was counted within each study. Based on individual study characteristics such as sample location and whether gender differences were assessed, the percentage of findings within each category was calculated. The findings were counted such that those that found marriage leads to a decrease in criminal offending<sup>1</sup> were labeled as having a negative relationship

---

<sup>1</sup>Of course, the "marriage effect" literature is mainly concentrated with the effect on marriage on desistance from crime. Recognizing the problems associated with measuring desistance (see Bushway et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001), we consider more generally the role that marriage plays in reducing subsequent offending.

**Table 2.1** Description of individual studies of the marriage effect

Study	Location of sample	Sample	Unique characteristics	Marriage measure	Special analysis notes	Findings
Barnes and Beaver (2012)	USA	Add Health, Waves I and III; twin data	Genes	Ever married	Binary desistance measure	(-) sig even when controlling for genes though effect size reduced by 60 %
Barnes et al. (2011)	USA	Add Health, Waves I–IV	Reciprocal effects of crime on future marriage	Ever married	Cross-lagged model and reciprocal effects model used	Cross-lagged model: (-) sig; reciprocal effects model: (-) NS
Beaver et al. (2008)	USA	Add Health, Waves I–III; twin data	Gene x Environment interaction	Ever married	Binary desistance measure; gender differences	Full sample: (-) sig; males: (-) sig on own and with 3 GXE interactions; females (-) sig on own and with 1 GXE interactions and (-)NS with 2 GXE interactions
Bersani et al. (2009)	Netherlands	Criminal career and life-course study—convicted men/women		Ever married	Hierarchical models; gender; context	Full sample: (-) sig; males: (-) sig; females: (-) sig; effects stronger for males;
Blokland and Nieuwbeerta (2005)	Netherlands	Criminal career and life-course study—convicted men/women		Ever married	Semi-parametric group-based models; used official arrests and self-reported offending	Official low-rate offenders: (-) sig; official moderate-rate: (-) sig; official high-rate: (?) NS; self-report: (?) NS
Brody and Cauffman (2006)	USA—Boston	424 delinquent women collected in 1930s		Most recent marriage; conventional vs. nonconventional spouse; marital quality	Desistance: binary measure	Being married: (?) NS; conventional husband: (-) sig; high quality: (-)sig
Craig and Foster (2013)	USA	Add Health, Waves I and III		Ever married	Desistance: change score; gender differences	Full sample: (-) sig; males: (-) sig; females: (-) sig

Daigle et al. (2008)	USA	Add Health, Waves I–III	Currently married	Desistance: binary; desistance measure also included victimization	(–) sig
Doherty (2006)	USA— Boston	Glueck data	Marital attachment	Desistance: decrease in offending; semi- parametric mixed Poisson model	Marriage: (–) sig; When self-control added, marriage: (–) sig; no moderating relationship
Doherty and Ensminger (2013)	USA— Chicago	The Woodlawn Project, $n = 965$ disadvantaged black youth through 32 years old	Currently married	Desistance: mean level of changes in offending; gender differences	Males: (–) sig in general and for property and drug arrests; females: (?) NS in general, (–) sig for property arrest, and (+) sig for drug arrests
Farrington and West (1995)	UK— London	Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development	Ever married; living with wife; separated; cohabitation	Convictions at 27–32 years old	Staying married: (–) sig; living with wife: (–) sig; cohabitating: (–) sig; separating: (+) sig
Forrest (2007)	USA	National Youth Survey	Living with spouse and lived together for majority of past 12 months; quality/bond of marriage	Desistance: binary; gender differences	Full sample: marriage: (–) sig; cohabitation: (?) NS; low-quality marriages: (+) sig; medium/ high-quality marriages: (–) sig; men—marriage: (–) sig; women—marriage (–) sig
Forrest and Hay (2011)	USA	National Longitudinal Survey of Youth— Child and Young Adult Supplement	Currently married	Desistance from marijuana use	Marriage: (–) sig; once self-control included, marriage: (?) NS

(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

Study	Location of sample	Sample	Unique characteristics	Marriage measure	Special analysis notes	Findings
Giordano et al. (2002)	USA—Ohio	244 delinquent girls/boys from Ohio institutions followed up 13 years later		Attachment to spouse	Desistance: binary; official arrest data	Male: (?) NS; female: (?) NS
Horney et al. (1995)	USA—Nebraska	658 incarcerated male offenders		Living with a wife vs. girlfriend	Event calendar used to investigate short-term offending by local life circumstances; official arrest data	Marriage: (–) sig; cohabitating with a girlfriend: (+) sig
King et al. (2007)	USA	National Youth Survey	Determines whether marriage propensity conditions marriage deterrent capacity	Married at Wave 6	Wave 7 offending; gender differences; propensity score matching	Males: (–) sig among low, medium, and high propensities; females: (–) sig among moderate propensity; (?) NS among low and high propensities
Krutttschnitt et al. (2000)	USA—Minnesota	Sex offenders in MN, mostly male, $n = 556$		Marital stability	Desistance: binary measure	(?) NS
Laub et al. (1998)	USA—Boston	Glueck data		Attachment to spouse; ever married age 32	Desistance: binary measure; semi-parametric Poisson mixture model	Good marriages: (–) sig, gradual, cumulative effects
Laub and Sampson (2003)	USA—Boston	Glueck data—500 delinquent men		Ever married and spousal attachment		(–) sig—closer bonds



Maume et al. (2005)	USA	National Youth Survey, Waves 5 and 6, $n=593$	Delinquent peers	Marital attachment	Marijuana use—binary distance measure	High attachment: (–) sig; low attachment: (?) NS; with peer exposure/delinquent peers exposure—same results
McGloin et al. (2011)	Netherlands	Criminal Career and Life-course Study; Dutch offenders from age 12 to between ages of 37/87		Marriage in specific year and 2 years prior/post year	Distance measured as offending versatility; random- and fixed-effect models	Marriage: (–) sig even when controlling for offending frequency, age, and sources of unobserved heterogeneity
O'Connell (2003)	USA— Delaware	577 incarcerated drug offenders—drug treatment follow-up study, 6 and 18 months out		Married at 6 month follow-up (however many married prior to incarceration)	Distance measure based on official arrest recidivism and self-reported drug use frequency; structural equation models	Marriage: (?) NS
Piquero, MacDonald and Parker (2002)	USA— California	524 CYA parolees, 7 years post-release		Ever married and common-law marriages	Official arrest data; racial differences	Full sample—Marriage: total arrests (–) sig; nonviolent arrests (–) sig; violent arrests (–) NS; common-law marriages: (+) sig; nonwhites—marriage: (–) sig; whites—marriage: (?) NS; nonviolent arrests: nonwhites—marriage: (–) sig, whites—marriage: (–) sig; common-law marriages—nonwhites: (+) sig, whites: (?) NS

(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

Study	Location of sample	Sample	Unique characteristics	Marriage measure	Special analysis notes	Findings
Porter and Purser (2010)	USA	Census Bureau and UCR data 2000	Community-level data	Percent married in community	Crime rate in community	Higher percent married in community (–) sig associated with a lower crime rate
Sampson and Laub (1993)	USA—Boston	Glueck data—500 delinquent men		Ever married and spousal attachment		Closer bonds: (–) sig
Sampson et al. (2006)	USA—Boston	Glueck data—500 delinquent men		Ever married and spousal attachment	Counterfactual approach and inverse probability-of-treatment weighting	Marriage reduces odds of offending by 35 %; marriage: (–) sig
Theobald and Farrington (2009)	UK—London	Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development; <i>n</i> = 162 convicted males	Propensity score matching	Date of marriage—at what point in life (early, mid, late)	Convictions pre/post marriage, comparing using propensity score matching	Marriage: (–) sig only for early and mid-range marriages in terms of age; late marriages: (?) NS
Theobald and Farrington (2011)	UK—London	Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development; <i>n</i> = 162 convicted males	Propensity score matching	Date of marriage—at what point in life (early, mid, late)	Explored their 2009 study's findings	Late married men- > nervous, > likely from broken home, drug users, go out with peers

van Schellen et al. (2012)	Netherlands	Criminal Career and Life-Course Study ( <i>n</i> = 4615)		Date of marriage	Used fixed effects Poisson models to estimate effect of marriage and spousal criminality on number of convictions	Marriage: men—(–) sig if married to non-convicted spouse, (?) NS if married to convicted spouse; women—(–) sig regardless of spouse's criminality
Warr (1998)	USA	National Youth Survey; waves 1–6	Delinquent peer relations and time spent with friends	Ever married	Self-reported marijuana use frequency; desistance: change- score analysis	Marriage alone: (–) sig; with peer variables, marriage: (–) NS
Zoutewelle- Terovan et al. (2012)	Netherlands	540 high-risk institu- tionalized delin- quents followed into adulthood	Gender differences	Official marriage/ partnership and divorce records	Official convictions	Males—marriage: (–) sig; females—marriage: (?) NS

Key: (+) marriage positively associated with offending; (?) marriage had no impact on offending; (–) marriage negatively associated with offending; NS not significant, sig statistically significant

**Table 2.2** Summary of findings on the effect of marriage on desistance from criminal behavior

	Total number of findings	Percentage of findings				
		– sig	– ns	? ns	+ ns	+ sig
Total	85	67	5.9	21.2	0	5.9
<b>Sample location</b>						
USA	65	66.1	7.7	20	0	6.1
Europe	20	70	0	25	0	5
<b>Sample composition</b>						
Offenders	35	60	2.8	31.4	0	5.7
Non-offenders	50	72	8	14	0	6
<b>Marriage quality</b>						
High	9	77.8	0	22.2	0	0
Low	3	0	0	66.7	0	33.3
None	73	68.5	6.8	19.2	0	5.5
<b>Marriage type</b>						
Legal	7	57.1	14.3	14.3	0	14.3
Common-law	3	0	0	33.3	0	66.7
None	75	70.7	5.3	21.3	0	2.7
<b>Interactions investigated</b>						
Genes	10	80	20	0	0	0
None	75	65.3	4	24	0	6.7
<b>Gender differences</b>						
Male	31	87.1	0	9.7	0	3.2
Female	20	55	10	30	0	5
None	34	55.9	8.8	26.5	0	8.8
<b>Race differences</b>						
White	13	76.9	0	23.1	0	0
Nonwhite	9	66.7	0	11.1	0	22.2
None	63	65.1	7.9	22.2	0	4.8

Key: (+) marriage positively associated with offending; (?) marriage had no impact on offending; (–) marriage negatively associated with offending; *ns* not significant, *sig* statistically significant

Note: In Table 2.2, only findings relating to marriage (and common-law marriages where noted) were included; findings regarding separation/cohabitation were not included

while those that found marriage leads to an increase in offending were given a positive relationship. Those findings are presented in Table 2.2 in order to provide a numerical representation of the marriage effect.

### 2.2.2 Empirical Status of the Marriage Effect

Looking over Table 2.2, it can be seen that most of the findings support the protective effect of marriage on crime. Specifically, 67 % of the included findings indicate a statistically significant negative relationship between marriage and desistance from crime. The work of Laub and Sampson (1993, 2003) using the Gluecks' data on delinquent boys in Boston showed marriage to significantly predict desistance

from crime. Further, these men describe marriage as driving the changes in their behavior and saving them from a miserable and potentially shorter life. Two specific empirical studies on the marriage effect using the Gluecks' data are worth highlighting in further detail.

First, using methods that allow for the isolation of unique trajectories of behavior, Laub et al. (1998) examined the extent to which marriage as well as the quality of marriage related to subsequent offending across distinct groups of offenders. Not only did the authors find that marriage (and marriage quality) related to crime differently across the trajectory groups, but also observed that marriage acted much like an investment process which led to a preventive effect from crime that is both gradual and cumulative. A second, more recent study by Sampson et al. (2006) reports on the analysis of the life histories of 52 delinquent boys from adolescence to the age of 72. Using a counterfactual analytic approach that helps account for the possible selection effect, they found that the married men had 35 % lower odds of offending compared to their offending odds while single. Importantly, this protective effect was robust and lasted well into late adulthood.

Support for the marriage effect is not restricted to US-based studies as most of the European samples also find evidence in favor of a marriage effect. This is especially important given the possible differences regarding the meaning of marriage cross-culturally. On this point, a study by Bersani et al. (2009) using data from the Netherlands finds that for offenders born between the years of 1907 and 1965, marriage significantly reduced the odds of offending across the sociohistorical context. Overall, the findings summarized in Table 2.2 suggest that marriage inhibits offending cross-culturally.

Sampson and Laub (1993) argued that the quality of marriage serves as the underlying, operative mechanism linking marriage to desistance, and among the studies that accounted for this characteristic, that assertion is generally supported. The studies assessing low-quality marriages found either a contradictory effect of marriage or a nonsignificant relationship between marriage and desistance (Forrest 2007; Maume et al. 2005). Among those studies analyzing marriages characterized by high attachment, most of those studies found a protective effect (Bushway et al. 2001; Forrest 2007; Laub et al. 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maume et al. 2005; Sampson and Laub 1993). Although qualitative interviews such as those used by Giordano et al. (2002) demonstrated that cognitive transformations rather than attachment are the more likely mechanisms underlying the marriage effect, this concept is difficult to measure and has rarely been empirically assessed.

Still, some evidence suggests that marriage may not be as crucial as Sampson and Laub have argued. As discussed previously, Warr (1998) provided evidence that what matters for the marriage effect is the reduction in time spent with delinquent peers and not the marital relationship itself. Further, Barnes et al. (2011) demonstrated the role genetics may play in the marriage-offending relationship. Their study of nationally representative sibling data found that before controlling for shared genetic influences, marriage led to a significant reduction in offending. Upon adding shared genetic influences to the analysis, the marriage effect decreased by 60 % though the relationship remained significant. These results show that the

marriage effect may be partially confounded by genetics. Considering that a close reciprocal relationship might exist between marriage and delinquency, Barnes et al. (2011) showed a weakened effect of marriage upon controlling for the contemporaneous influence of criminal involvement on marriage. Finally, insights by Burt et al. (2010) provide a possible point of convergence in the theoretical debate over whether marriage reflects selection or causation. Using a longitudinal twin design, they found that individuals in their sample who married exhibited less antisocial behavior than their unmarried twin counterparts. At the same time, among those who married there were marked decreases in delinquent behavior followed the timing of their marriage.

### ***2.2.3 Gender Differences in the Marriage Effect***

Research on the impact of marriage on desistance from crime has also investigated possible gender differences in the marriage effect. According to Table 2.2, among males, 87.1 % of the findings demonstrate a significant relationship in line with the hypothesis that marriage has a protective effect on offending. However, that same relationship was only found among 55 % of the female-specific studies. Several scholars have developed explanations for this relationship and perhaps the most common is Laub et al.'s (1998) assertion that men tend to marry up while females marry down. Others argue that the spouse needs to provide a prosocial orientation for the offender to follow in order for desistance to occur (Giordano et al. 2002). As discussed above, Simons et al. (2002) showed evidence that the bonds of marriage were significantly related to desistance in females, yet for males the true catalyst came from the change in peer group such marriages provide.

King et al. (2007) controlled for the subject's propensity to marry when assessing the impact of marriage on offending. They found that for males, regardless of their propensity, marriage led to a decrease in their offending. Males who were least likely to marry, however, saw the most protective effects. For females, on the other hand, the results indicated that only those with a moderate propensity to marry had a significant reduction in offending following marriage. Among women with either low or high propensities, there was no significant difference in offending pre- and post-marriage. King et al. proposed that males are more likely to marry someone with a less deviant history than females, accounting for these gender differences.

In a recent study using a sample of convicted offenders from the Netherlands, van Schellen et al. (2012) investigated the impact of the spouses' criminal history on later criminal convictions. Among men, future convictions were reduced by 30 % among those who married someone with no history of convictions. If they married someone with an official record, there were no significant differences in convictions relative to singletons. For women however, upon marriage they were less likely to be convicted regardless of the conviction history of the spouse. The scholars also found that men with more serious criminal histories and those with more stable marriages experienced the strongest reduction in

convictions. It is difficult to isolate the primary reason for these observed differences and further research is needed to understand the moderating influence of gender in the marriage effect.

### ***2.2.4 Marriage vs. Romantic Relationship***

Some scholars who have studied the marriage effect have also compared it to the impact of cohabitation with a significant other as well as with common-law marriages. For instance, Piquero et al. (2002) found that common-law marriages either increased arrests or did not have an impact on arrest among a group of California juvenile parolees followed for 7 years post-parole. Meanwhile, marriage was followed by decreases in arrests. Additionally, Horney et al. (1995) reported an increase in offending among those living with a girlfriend, but a decrease among those residing with a wife.

At the same time, not all of these findings have been consistent. Among the men studied in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, both those who lived with their wife or cohabitated with their romantic partner were protected from future offending (Farrington and West 1995). Perhaps the quality of the romantic relationship and the criminal background of the partner play a role in the individual's desistance, or perhaps it is a function of the sample (where Piquero et al. and Horney et al. used offender-based samples while Farrington used a community sample). Nevertheless, as taking the conscious step to get married demonstrates some non-negligible commitment, being married appears to be more protective of future offending than cohabitating with a significant other in most of the reviewed studies.

### ***2.2.5 Issues in Studying the Marriage Effect***

In a recent study, Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2013) studied Norwegian men who entered into their first marriage between 1997 and 2001. Using official data, they estimated each male's offending propensity both 5 years prior to and 5 years after marriage. As opposed to marriage leading to desistance, they instead found a courtship effect, indicating that there was a large decrease in offending prior to marriage. This was followed by a small increase immediately following marriage, especially for felony offenses. The authors suggest that among those with the increase in offending, this behavior is due more to "fairly stable, individual-level visceral factors such as proneness to addictions and temperament" (Lyngstad and Skardhamar 2013, p. 6).

This study offers a unique way for scholars to avoid the possible temporal issue problem that may be present in some studies. For instance, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a longitudinal study of a

nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7–12 throughout the USA and used by several researchers to examine the marriage effect, does not measure the exact date of self-reported offending or marriage. The respondents are asked about their offending behavior 12 months prior to the survey and then if they had ever been married. If a researcher uses one wave of data for both the marriage and offending measures, she cannot know for certain whether the marriage happened before or after the offending (see Craig and Foster 2013). However, the data used by Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2013) permitted them to assess offending both pre- and post-wedding, thereby reducing the temporal order problem. Of course, future studies should utilize such methods in order to investigate the possibility of this courtship effect.

## 2.3 Conclusions

Identifying the causes and correlates of criminal desistance is an important theoretical and policy question. This chapter focused on one specific “intervention” that has been subject to much criminological attention—the marriage effect. Although not typically considered (much less mandated) as an intervention, marriage has been considered via several theoretical frameworks, including primarily control theory and to a lesser extent social learning theory. Our review of the empirical literature investigating the relationship between marriage and crime in contemporary criminological research indicates an overall protective effect of marriage on subsequent criminal desistance.

To be sure, there are some limitations that hamper the current state of marriage–crime research—all of which suggest important directions for future research. First, because marriage is not a legally mandated intervention, methodological questions remain with respect to how it helps to foster the desistance process, including temporal order and selection effects. And while researchers have been able to develop and/or apply advanced statistical techniques that help to address these issues (see e.g., Barnes et al. 2011; Sampson et al. 2006) skeptics remain as to whether marriage actually caused the change in offending or if something about the person leads to both events occurring (i.e., an individual decides to “settle down” and get married and stop offending) (e.g., Hirschi and Gottfredson 1995). Another limitation concerns the analysis of other potentially important mediating mechanisms, and while some important headway has been made in this regard (Warr 1998; Giordano et al. 2002), there may be several others worthy of consideration and analysis. A third area of future inquiry concerns potentially important moderator effects in terms of race/ethnicity and gender. Unfortunately, many longitudinal studies do not contain sufficient variation across key demographic groups in order to assess these issues. Lastly, much attention has focused on the crime-reducing effects of marriages and especially good-quality marriages, but it seems equally important to assess if disruption of a marriage or removal from a marriage negatively affects any potential informal social control effect and, in turn, leads to a higher likelihood of offending.



From the perspective of some persons (and even some criminological theories—such as General Strain Theory), the removal of a noxious stimuli (perhaps a bad marriage) may actually serve to alleviate a key stressor and, in turn, reduce offending. Toward this end, Bersani and Doherty (2013) recently found that those with shorter marriages were less likely to be arrested following a divorce compared to when they were married. Those who had been married for two years or more actually demonstrated an increase in arrests following divorce. These and other questions remain worthy of theoretical inquiry and empirical scrutiny.

## References

- Barnes, J. C., & Beaver, K. M. (2012). Marriage and desistance from crime: A consideration of gene-environment correlation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 19–33.
- Barnes, J. C., Golden, K., Mancini, C., Boutwell, B. B., Beaver, K. M., & Diamond, B. (2011). Marriage and involvement in crime: A consideration of reciprocal effects in a nationally representative sample. *Justice Quarterly*. doi:[10.1080/07418825.2011.641577](https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2011.641577).
- Beaver, K. M., Wright, J. P., DeLisi, M., & Vaughn, M. G. (2008). Desistance from delinquency: The marriage effect revisited and extended. *Social Science Research*, 37, 736–752.
- Bersani, B. E., Laub, J. H., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2009). Marriage and desistance from crime in the Netherlands: Do gender and socio-historical context matter? *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 25, 3–24.
- Bersani, B.E. & Doherty, E.E. (2013). When the ties that bind unwind: Examining the enduring and situational processes of change behind the marriage effect. *Criminology*, 51, 399–433.
- Blokland, A. A. J., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2005). The effects of life circumstances on longitudinal trajectories of offending. *Criminology*, 43, 1203–1240.
- Broidy, L. M., & Cauffman, E. E. (2006). *Understanding the female offender*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Justice.
- Burt, S. A., Donnellan, M. B., Humbar, M. N., Hicks, B. M., McGue, M., & Iacono, W. G. (2010). Does marriage inhibit antisocial behavior? An examination of selection vs. causation via a longitudinal twin design. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 67(12), 1309–1315.
- Bushway, S. D., Piquero, A. R., Broidy, L. M., Cauffman, E., & Mazerolle, P. (2001). An empirical framework for studying desistance as a process. *Criminology*, 39, 491–516.
- Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, R. (1988). *Sociology of marriage and the family: Gender, love and property*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Craig, J., & Foster, H. (2013). Desistance in the transition to adulthood: The roles of marriage, military, and gender. *Deviant Behavior*, 34, 208–223.
- Daigle, L. E., Beaver, K. M., & Hartman, J. L. (2008). A life-course approach to the study of victimization and offending behaviors. *Victims and Offenders*, 3, 365–390.
- Doherty, E. E. (2006). Self-control, social bonds, and desistance: A test of life-course interdependence. *Criminology*, 44, 807–833.
- Doherty, E. E., & Ensminger, M. E. (2013). Marriage and offending among a cohort of disadvantaged African Americans. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50, 104–131.
- Farrington, D. P., & West, D. J. (1995). Effects of marriage, separation, and children on offending by adult males. *Current Perspectives on Aging and the Life Cycle*, 4, 249–281.
- Forrest, W. (2007). *Adult family relationships and desistance from crime*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

- Forrest, W., & Hay, C. (2011). Life-course transitions, self-control, and desistance from crime. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 11, 487–513.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Holland, D. D. (2003). Changes in friendship relations over the life course: Implications for desistance from crime. *Criminology*, 41(2), 293–328.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(4), 990–1064.
- Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. R. (1995). Control theory and life-course perspective. *Studies on Crime and Crime Prevention*, 4, 131–142.
- Horney, J., Osgood, D. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1995). Criminal careers in the short-term: Intra-individual variability in crime and its relation to local life circumstances. *American Sociological Review*, 60, 655–673.
- King, R. D., Massoglia, M., & MacMillan, R. (2007). The context of marriage and crime: Gender, the propensity to marry, and offending in early adulthood. *Criminology*, 45, 33–65.
- Kruttschnitt, C., Uggen, C., & Shelton, K. (2000). Predictors of desistance among sex offenders: The interaction of formal and informal social controls. *Justice Quarterly*, 17, 61–87.
- Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Good marriages and trajectories of change in criminal offending. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 225–238.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (1993). Turning points in the life course: Why change matters in the study of crime. *Criminology*, 31(3), 301–325.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime. In M. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and justice: A review of research*. Vol. 28 (pp. 1–69). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lyngstad, T. H., & Skardhamar, T. (2013). Changes in criminal offending around the time of marriage. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. doi:[10.1177/0022427812469516](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427812469516).
- Maume, M. O., Ousey, G. C., & Beaver, K. (2005). Cutting the grass: A reexamination of the link between marital attachment, delinquent peers, and desistance from marijuana use. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 21, 27–53.
- McGloin, J. M., Sullivan, C. J., Piquero, A. R., Blokland, A., & Nieuwebeerta, P. (2011). Marriage and offending specialization: Expanding the impact of turning points and the process of desistance. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8, 361–376.
- O'Connell, D. J. (2003). Investigating latent trait and life course theories as predictors of recidivism among an offender sample. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 31, 455–467.
- Piquero, A. R., Brame, R., Mazerolle, P., & Haapanen, R. (2002). Crime in emerging adulthood. *Criminology*, 40, 137–170.
- Piquero, A. R., MacDonald, J. M., & Parker, K. F. (2002). Race, local life circumstances, and criminal activity. *Social Science Quarterly*, 83, 654–670.
- Porter, J. R., & Purser, C. W. (2010). Social disorganization, marriage, and reported crime: A spatial econometrics examination of family formation and criminal offending. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38, 942–950.
- Rhule-Louie, D. M., & McMahon, R. J. (2007). Problem behavior and romantic relationships: Assortative mating, behavior contagion, and desistance. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 10(1), 53–100.
- Rowe, D. C., & Farrington, D. P. (1997). The familial transmission of criminal convictions. *Criminology*, 35, 177–201.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1990). Crime and deviance over the life course: The salience of adult social bonds. *American Sociological Review*, 55, 609–627.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sampson, R. J., Laub, J. H., & Wimer, C. (2006). Does marriage reduce crime? A counterfactual approach to within-individual causal effects. *Criminology*, 44, 465–508.
- Sherman, L. W., Farrington, D. P., Welsh, B. C., & MacKenzie, D. (Eds.). (2002). *Evidence-based crime prevention*. London: Routledge.

- Simons, R. L., Johnson, C. C., Beaman, J., & Conger, R. D. (1993). Explaining women's double jeopardy: Factors that mediate the association between harsh treatment as a child and violence by a husband. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 713–723.
- Simons, R. L., Stewart, E., Gordon, L. C., Conger, R. D., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (2002). A test of life-course explanations for stability and change in antisocial behavior from adolescence to young adulthood. *Criminology*, 40(2), 401–434.
- Theobald, D., & Farrington, D. P. (2009). Effects of getting married on offending: Results from a prospective longitudinal survey of males. *European Journal of Criminology*, 6, 496–516.
- Theobald, D., & Farrington, D. P. (2011). Why do the crime-reducing effects of marriage vary with age? *British Journal of Criminology*, 51, 136–158.
- van Schellen, M., Apel, R., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2012). “Because you're mine, I walk the line”? Marriage, spousal criminality, and criminal offending over the life course. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 28, 701–723.
- Warr, M. (1998). Life-course transitions and desistance from crime. *Criminology*, 36, 183–215.
- Warr, M. (2002). *Companions in crime: The social aspects of criminal conduct*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zoutewelle-Terovan, M., van der Geest, V., Liefbroer, A., & Bijleveld, C. (2012). Criminality and family formation: Effects of marriage and parenthood on criminal behavior for men and women. *Crime and Delinquency*. doi:10.1177/0011128712441745.

Effective Interventions in the Lives of Criminal Offenders

Humphrey, J.A.; Cordella, P. (Eds.)

2014, XVII, 149 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-8929-0