

**Highlighting New
Poverty Research****by Derek A. Kreager,
Ross L. Matsueda, and
Elena A. Erosheva.**

"Motherhood and Criminal
Desistance in Disadvantaged
Neighborhoods." *Criminology*
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**Motherhood and Criminal Desistance in
Disadvantaged Neighborhoods**

Background. Becoming a parent is likely to be a major event in any individual's life. For low-income women in particular, motherhood might be a particularly significant turning point. Qualitative research suggests that young women in disadvantaged communities may reduce their participation in delinquent behavior and drug use when they become mothers. In addition to the time involved in caring for a child, becoming a parent might reduce delinquent behavior by giving disadvantaged women an opportunity to redefine themselves in a more conventional role as a mother or by increasing their incentives to avoid incarceration. Prior quantitative research has found mixed results regarding the associations between parenthood and trends in delinquent behaviors, but no study has examined this relationship solely among disadvantaged women and through observing the behaviors of the same women over time.

Methods. WCPC Affiliate Ross Matsueda, along with his colleagues Derek Kreager and Elena Erosheva, test whether motherhood is associated with a reduction in drug use and delinquent behaviors using longitudinal survey data from over 500 women of varying ethnic backgrounds from disadvantaged neighborhoods in Denver, Colorado. The women in the sample were observed for 12 years, beginning at ages 10 to 15, capturing their years of peak fertility and delinquency. Using a model with individual-specific fixed effects, the researchers explored the impacts of a woman's age, the timing of motherhood (i.e., whether or not a woman had her first child by age 19), and her marital status on five outcomes: an index of delinquent behaviors, fighting, stealing, marijuana use, and alcohol consumption.

Findings. Compared with women nationally, the women in the sample had much higher rates of teen births and a lower incidence of marriage between the ages of 20 to 24. By age 19, for example, nearly 40 percent of women in the sample had become mothers. Controlling for age, marital status, pregnancy, and contraceptive use, becoming a mother (regardless of the timing) was associated with a statistically significant decline in delinquent behaviors among the women sampled, as well as with declines in fighting, marijuana use, and alcohol use. Motherhood was also associated with a statistically significant decline in stealing among teen mothers but not among those who had their first child after age 19. In terms of magnitude, the decline in delinquent behaviors associated with teenage motherhood was larger than the expected decline in delinquency associated with aging from 18 to 26. Getting married was associated with a statistically significant decline in marijuana use and alcohol use, but not in the other behaviors. Across all of the outcomes, the effect of motherhood was stronger than that of marriage. As expected, pregnancy was also associated with significant declines in all five measures of delinquency. These relationships were similar across racial/ethnic groups and when comparing women from the poorest neighborhoods in the sample with the rest of the sample.

The researchers note that while their findings support the idea that motherhood is associated with declines in various high-risk behaviors among disadvantaged women, they do not know whether their results would hold among women in different socioeconomic contexts or among men transitioning to fatherhood. The finding that motherhood was more strongly associated with changes in delinquent behaviors and drug use than marriage reinforces interview-based research that suggests that motherhood may be a more transformative experience than marriage among young, disadvantaged women.

Poverty Research Flash

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Poverty Research Flash 2011-01 **Motherhood and Criminal Desistance in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods**

New research from Derek A. Kreager, Ross L. Matsueda, and Elena A. Erosheva

Key Findings

- In a sample of racially diverse young women living in high-crime neighborhoods in Denver, Colorado, becoming a mother (both as a teenager and after age 19) was associated with a statistically significant decline in an index of delinquency, as well as with declines in fighting, marijuana use, and alcohol use. Teenage motherhood was also associated with a significant decline in stealing.
- In terms of size, the decline in delinquent behavior associated with teenage motherhood was larger than the expected decline in delinquency associated with moving from age 18 to 26.
- Marriage was associated with a statistically significant decline in marijuana use and alcohol use, but not in the other behaviors.
- Across all of the outcomes, the effect of motherhood was stronger than that of marriage.