Frequency and seriousness of parental offending and their impact on juvenile offending

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Abstract

The present study investigated to what extent the frequency and seriousness of parental offending were related to their offspring offending. Police officers in one Dutch province completed a form to register risk factors and the actions undertaken when they came into contact with offenders aged 8–14 years. These juveniles were followed for 18 months to establish whether or not they committed more crimes. In addition, the parents of these children were traced in the police criminal record systems. Data were gathered from 577 children and their parents. Of these children, 34% were exposed to parental criminality, of which 33 delinquents had two criminal parents and 163 had one criminal parent. If both parents were criminal, the child had the highest frequency of offending. Further, the frequency of parental offending was positively related to the frequency of the child’s offending. Concerning the seriousness of juvenile crimes, the seriousness of the committed offences of the father showed a positive relation with the seriousness of his child’s offending. Unexpectedly, a negative association was found between the seriousness of maternal offending and the seriousness of her child offending. These results offered a better understanding of the influence that parents with a criminal history have on their children. Further research is needed to identify mechanisms underlying this relationship in order to provide appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.

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Keywords: Parental criminality; Frequency and seriousness of offending; Children and early adolescents

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Introduction

Parental criminality is considered as one of the risk factors behind the development of criminality in children and adolescents. Several studies indicated positive relationships between parental criminality and criminal behaviors of children (e.g. Farrington, 1995, 2002; Ferwerda, Jacobs, & Beke, 1996), which can be referred to as intergenerational continuity. Some conclude that parental criminality is one of the most important factors within the family environment to predict juvenile delinquency, independent of other risk factors such as drug abuse and low intelligence (Farrington, 2000; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). Particularly, persistent offenders come from families in which parents exhibit criminal behavior. These parents often have relatively positive attitudes toward criminality, i.e. the criminal behavior of their offspring is not be discouraged by them, or at least is not in conflict with parental norms and values (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Loeber, & Henry, 1998).

Despite knowing that parental criminality is related to the child’s offending, few studies explored the relationships between parental and children’s offending. Therefore, the current study investigates the parental criminal backgrounds of early adolescents and children who are engaged in delinquent activities. Several studies that examined criminal parents as risk factors will be described and also theoretical explanations will be given explaining the relations between parental and children’s delinquency.

Criminal parents as a risk factor

Surprisingly, only few studies explored the familial criminal backgrounds of juvenile offenders. Results of the Cambridge Study (Farrington, 1995), focusing on a sample of 411 South-London boys, revealed that parental criminality is especially a risk factor for children aged 8—10. They found that of all boys with a criminal father, 49% already had a police record compared to 18% of the boys without a criminal father. If both parents were criminal, about 63% of all boys had a police record compared to 41% with one criminal parent. Thus, the higher the level of criminality in a child’s family background, the greater the risk of its criminal behavior. It also appeared that criminal mothers had a stronger influence on girls, and fathers on boys. In addition, Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, and Kalb (2001) found that similarities in delinquency were stronger for same sex familial relationships than for opposite sex relationships. They investigated the offending concentration in families (including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) to predict delinquent behavior in a sample of 1395 boys. Arrests, court petitions, and self-reports were used to gain insight into the delinquent activities of boys. They found that 25.1% of the boys with an arrested father were arrested themselves compared to 6.7% of the boys without an arrested father. Court petitions of the boys were primarily predicted by the arrests of fathers and brothers, and reported male delinquency was predicted by the arrests of fathers as well as mothers. They concluded that, despite the fact that arrests of virtually all family members were a risk factor for a boy’s delinquency, arrests of the father constituted the strongest predictor, independent of the arrests of other family members. Similarly, Farrington (2000) concluded that having a criminal father doubled the risk that the son would be convicted as well. Having a criminal father also increased the risk of persistent offending. Finally, having criminal parents affected the type of crimes committed by the child. It appears that sons act more
aggressively in committing crimes if they have a criminal father compared to children with a non-criminal father (Baker & Mednick, 1984). McCord (1979) found that children with aggressive parents committed more crimes against persons. But how can the relation between parental offending and offending of the child be explained?

Theoretical background

Research that examines the differences and similarities between criminal behaviors of parents and children is called intergenerational development. The influence of parental criminal behavior on the offending of the child can be explained by different criminological explanations. First, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) stated that criminal behavior can be explained by a lack of self-control. Parents, who are not able to recognize, control, and punish deviant behaviors of their children, are very likely to have children with low self-control. Criminal parents often show a lack of self-control themselves, resulting in poor parenting practices, which in turn causes low self-control of their offspring. As a consequence of this low self-control, the child is unable to resist satisfying its needs in the short term, resulting in criminal behavior. Also Laub and Sampson (1988) stated that criminality of parents operates through parenting practices. Criminal parents are more likely to show inadequate parenting styles, including neglectful, harsh, and authoritarian parenting (Farrington, 1995). Harsh (Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004; Chang, Dodge, Schwartz, & McBride-Chang, 2003) and authoritarian parenting (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Carrano, 2006; Smith & Farrington, 2004), and poor supervision (Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003) have been shown to increase the risk of engaging in delinquent activities. Another theory by which the influence parents have on their children can be explained is called the social learning theory (Burgess & Akers, 1966). The social learning theory states that behavior will be learned by interactions with the environment. Behavior will be repeated when it is rewarded or encouraged. Also, imitation plays an important role within this theory. In terms of criminality, from this perspective children will imitate their parents’ behaviors. When a parent shows criminal behavior, the child is likely to imitate this behavior. When this behavior is also encouraged by the parents or not punished, the child will be more likely to repeat this behavior. Children will learn to believe that offending is not illegal. Third, Shaw (1930) explained that criminal youths are not necessarily different than their non-criminal peers, except that they were influenced by environmental factors, such as unfavourable neighborhoods, single-parent families, and poverty. It appeared that these environmental factors can be predictors of delinquent activities (Juby & Farrington, 2001; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Parents who experience structural adversity are more likely to show poor parenting practices, which in turn leads to a higher risk for delinquent activities. Fourth, the influence of parental criminality on the criminal career of their children can also be explained by the strain theory (Merton, 1938). Like Shaw, the strain theory states that it is the environment leading to criminality. Strain means that people’s needs and wishes cannot be realized by their opportunities and capacities. Most delinquents come from families with low socio-economic status. These parents often lack the educational backgrounds and social skills to provide better living circumstances, thereby increasing the risk of criminal activities. Hence, these children often will not have the optimal future perspectives, and are more likely to end up in criminal activities. Criminality is then often seen as the only way to achieve certain goals. These above mentioned theories all give different explanations for the relation between parental...
criminality and criminal behaviors of their children. In the present study we by and large examined to what extent parents would influence the criminal activities of their children.

The present study

In the Netherlands, little is known about the impacts of the frequency and the seriousness of parental offending on the frequency and seriousness of the offenses committed by their children (van de Rakt, Nieuwbeerta, & De Graaf, 2006). Therefore, the present study examined the influence of having criminal parents on the criminal behavior of children. The research questions were: (1) Is the criminal behavior of the parent related to the criminal behavior of the child, and (2) Do the frequency and seriousness of offending by the parents influence the frequency and seriousness of offending of their children? We hypothesized that a positive relationship exists between criminal parents and the criminal behaviors of their children. We also expected to find correlations between the frequencies and the seriousness of the offenses committed by the parents and their offspring.

It is important to note that our study was not a general population study. Our sample existed exclusively of criminal children with their criminal and non-criminal parent(s). But where most other studies included only boys in their sample, we also included girls. Nowadays, girls appear to commit more crimes (Ministry of Justice, 2003). Excluding girls from the sample would not give us a representative sample of children who come in contact with the police. Moreover, we used a younger age group. A new development in criminality is that more and more children have their first police contact under the age of 12 (Ministry of Justice, 2003). According to Moffitt’s theory, these children are called the life course persistent delinquents, who have a higher risk to show long and serious criminal careers. A last strength of our study is that the data were collected from the police registration system, by which we avoided the well-known drawback of using self-reports (Maxfield, Weiler, & Widom, 2000; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). The main drawback of self-reports on delinquency is social desirability. It appeared that especially females with a registration in the police system are less likely to report about their arrests (Maxfield, Weiler, & Widom, 2000).

Method

Procedure

Data for the present study were collected as part of a study on the effects of risk factors on future delinquent behaviors of young offenders. In the period April 2003–January 2005 police officers in the province of Gelderland filled out a form every time they came in contact with children aged 8–14, who were suspected of having committed a crime. All children who had contact with the police during this period in this area were involved in the present study. The form allows police officers to record risk factors of the child and the actions taken by them after the crime, as well as the child’s home address, gender, living situation, and any earlier police contacts. Each time the form was completed, any prior arrests of that juvenile were traced in the regional police system. Each offender was followed for 18 months to establish whether (or not) more crimes were committed. It is important to emphasize that the participants did not know that they participated in this study, which made using self-reports difficult. The Ministry of Justice as well
as the regional police department gave permission to look into the police records of both children and parents. Before they gave permission, the background of the first author was checked by the internal intelligence service. The first author also had to sign an agreement of confidentiality.

A total of 738 children for whom such a form was filled out represented the participants in this study. The addresses of the children were used to track the criminal behaviors of their parents. Information on parents could be found for 577 children. For the remaining 161 no information was found for reasons such as: the child/family had moved away, the family was not legally registered, the child lived in a psychiatric setting, or more than two adults were registered at the same address. These 161 children were excluded from further analyses. Then, to check for possible parental criminality, we were allowed to search out the national police registration system. This system records the dates and types of crimes, thus enabling us to retrieve the total frequency and seriousness of the crimes committed by parents. Depending on the seriousness of the crime its duration was recorded in the registration system. The less serious crimes were removed from the system if the person did not have any contacts with the police during the last 5 years. The more serious crimes were kept in the system for a longer period, depending on the seriousness of the crimes. We included all registered crimes committed by parents, which means that possibly less serious crimes had been removed already from the system.

**Participants**

Of the 577 children whose parents could be retrieved from the system, 79.9% were male and 20.1% were female. The mean age on which the children started to commit crimes was 12.51 (SD = 2.01). Of these children, 126 fathers had committed one or more crimes and 306 had no criminal record. Of the mothers, 103 showed criminal behavior and 446 did not. Most of the children (60.5%) were living with both parents, others were living with the mother only (25.3%), with the father only (4.3%), with the mother and stepfather (5.9%), with the father and stepmother (2.4%), with another family member (0.5%), in a psychiatric setting/home (0.2%), and in a foster home (0.7%). For 0.2% of the children the living situation was unknown. Most of the parents committed crimes (57.3%) after the birth of their child. Of the 568 children still living with their parent(s), 38.6% lived in broken families of which the biological fathers were absent (82.2%).

**Measures**

**Parental offending**

The national police system was used to retrieve data on the frequency and seriousness of the offences committed by the parents. We coded each committed offence as (1) less serious, (2) moderately serious, and (3) serious, such that for all committed crimes a mean score on seriousness could be calculated. This classification was based on research from the Scientific Research Documentation Centre in the Netherlands (Wartna, Blom, & Tollenaar, 2004). More specifically, the crimes were coded based on the opinions of two great experts in this field. Both are highly qualified police officers who have been experts on criminality for many years. If children come in contact with the police, these two decide what the consequences will be. They have to make these decisions every day, based on the type and seriousness of the committed crimes, and have proven their expertise when classifying crimes. To allow comparison, two experts were chosen to categorize the crimes.
Although some crimes were categorized differently, most crimes were in agreement (75%). The crimes categorized differently by the experts were discussed again and only if they reached total agreement they were categorized. Examples of less serious crimes committed by parents were: ‘driving while intoxicated’, ‘perjury’, and ‘handling stolen goods’. Moderately serious offences were, for example, ‘swindle’, ‘theft’, and ‘burglary’. Examples of serious offences were: ‘manslaughter’, ‘rape’, and ‘grievous bodily harm’. A list of all offences divided into the three categories can be obtained from the first author. When both parents of a child were criminal, the mean number of committed crimes and the mean seriousness score of the crimes were calculated.

**Offending of the children**

The children in this study were followed in the regional police system for 18 months after the form had been completed by the police officer. In addition, any earlier offences of the child were also retrieved from this system. This provides full insight into all crimes committed by one child during a period of at least 18 months, including age of onset and types of committed offences. Similar to their parents, the offences of the children were also coded as less serious, moderately serious, or serious, and a mean score for seriousness was calculated. When categorizing the crimes, the age of the children (between 8 and 14) was taken into account. The percentage of agreement between both experts was 80%. Examples of less serious crimes committed by children were ‘graffiti’, ‘causing inconvenience to person(s) by firework’ and ‘vandalism’. Examples of moderately serious offences were ‘stealing from school’, ‘stealing from car’ and ‘swindle’. Examples of serious offences were ‘rape’, ‘violence causing injury with or without a weapon’ and ‘robbery’.

**Statistical analyses**

The analyses reported here are based on a sample of 577 children (aged 8–14), whose parents were traced in the national police system to establish whether or not they had been engaged in criminal activities. We applied t-tests to examine differences in the frequencies of offences between children with a criminal father or mother and children with a non-criminal father or mother. To examine differences between children with one, two or no criminal parents, an ANOVA was conducted. The relations between the frequencies of the father’s offences and the frequencies of the mother’s offences were calculated with Pearson correlations.

To examine how the frequency and seriousness of the child’s offences were associated with the number and seriousness of the father and mother’s offences, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using the program Amos 5 (Arbuckle, 2003). SEM was used, since we had two dependent variables (frequency and seriousness of offending of the children) that we had to test in one model (to control for the covariation between these variables) and SEM gives the opportunity to test models with multiple dependent variables. The other advantage was the statistical control for associations between independent variables, and the opportunity to look at specific links, for instance, maternal seriousness of delinquency and child seriousness, while controlling for the link with this variable and the other dependent variable (child frequency of delinquency). The chi-square and the $P$-value were calculated; however, the chi-square and $P$-value rely on the sample size of the study (Kaplan, 2000). Since the present study has a large sample ($N = 577$), the chi-square and accompanying $P$-value are not reliable enough to use for interpretation of the goodness of fit. Therefore, the goodness of fit of the model was also assessed using the
Comparative Fit Index (CFI: Bentler, 1989), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA: Steiger, 1990). Concerning the CFI, values above .90 suggest an acceptable fit and values above .95 indicate an excellent fit to the data. RMSEA values below .08 suggest an acceptable fit between the model and the data, and values below .05 indicate a good fit.

We estimated four models using SEM that specified the hypothesized associations between the father or the mother’s criminal backgrounds and the child’s offences. Two figures illustrate these four models, in which each figure includes information on both males and females. Fig. 2 illustrates one model based on a sample of criminal and non-criminal fathers ($n = 432$) and the other model based on a sample of criminal and non-criminal mothers ($n = 549$). Fig. 3 also illustrates one model for fathers and one model for mothers. In this figure the non-criminal fathers and mothers were excluded from the analyses, yielding subsamples of criminal fathers ($n = 126$) and criminal mothers ($n = 103$). Separate analyses for parents with a criminal history were conducted, since it is possible that the sample of parents who are offenders are more likely to have children who are offenders as well. In the models two control variables, gender and age of onset, were included. Gender was included, for boys, on average, commit more crimes compared to girls (Hay, 2003; Junger-Tas, Ribeaud, & Cruyff, 2007; Piquero & Chung, 2001). Parents often respond more harshly to males than to females, which will increase the risks for boys of being engaged in criminal activities (Hay, 2003). It also appears that as a reaction on stress within the family, boys more often experience anger, while girls experience feelings of guilt. Anger can be seen as a predictor of delinquency (Hay, 2003). Another reason that can explain the gender gap concerning delinquency is that social control seems to be higher for girls than for boys (Junger-Tas, Ribeaud, & Cruyff, 2007). Also, age of onset appears to influence criminal behavior. The younger the child at his first police contact, the higher the risk of a longer, serious criminal career (Moffitt, 1993; van Dam, 2004; Kruize & Gruter, 2003) and the more opportunities this child has for offending.

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the relation between parental offending and offending of the child.
All direct paths between the independent variables (frequency of father’s/mother’s offences, mean seriousness of father’s/mother’s offences, gender and age of onset of the child’s criminal behavior) and dependent variables (frequency and seriousness of the child’s offences) were estimated (see Fig. 1).

Results

Descriptive analyses

The number of children with two criminal parents was 33, while 163 children had one criminal parent, and 381 children had parents who showed no criminal activities. In 91.1% of the cases the biological father was involved, in 8.0% a stepfather, and 1.0% a foster father. Concerning criminal mothers, 97.1% was the biological mother, 1.0% stepmother, and 1.0% an aunt. All the children in our sample had committed one or more offences, with a mean of 2.92 (SD = 3.68) ranging from 1 to 31. The mean seriousness of the committed offences was 1.53 (SD = .54). After following the children in the police system for at least 18 months, 47.6% can still be considered a first offender and 52.4% can be categorized as persistent offender. The mean number of offences of the persistent offenders was 4.64 (SD = 4.11) with a mean seriousness of 1.57 (SD = .42). A t-test showed that children with a criminal father (M = 4.00, SD = 5.34) committed more crimes compared to children with a non-criminal father (M = 2.16, SD = 1.96) (t(432) = 41.77, p < .001). The same applies to mothers (t(549) = 18.11, p < .001); children with a criminal mother (M = 3.95, SD = 5.26) committed more crimes compared to children with a non-criminal mother (M = 2.59, SD = 2.78).

The criminal parents (n = 229) committed a total of 1824 offences with a mean seriousness of 1.74 (SD = .50) ranging from 1 (less serious) to 3 (serious). Fathers with a history of offending (n = 126) committed on average 9.07 crimes (SD = 15.70), ranging from 1 to 83. The average seriousness of these crimes was 1.68 (SD = .49), mothers (n = 103), on the other hand, committed on average 6.61 offences (SD = 11.32), ranging from 1 to 53. The mean seriousness of these crimes was 1.82 (SD = .52). A cross-tabulation showed a significant positive relation between the frequency of offences of the mother (n = 549) and that of the father (n = 432) (χ²(577) = 3695.49, p < .001). A Pearson correlation showed significant relations between the frequency of offences of the parents and the frequency of offences of the children (r = .37, p < .01).

Further, an ANOVA showed that children with two criminal parents committed more offences compared to children with one or no criminal parents (F(2, 574) = 18.74, p < .001). Post-hoc tests showed that children with two criminal parents (M = 6.24, SD = 8.10) committed a significantly higher number of crimes compared to children with one criminal parent (M = 3.06, SD = 3.25) or no criminal parents (M = 2.53, SD = 2.66). No differences were found between children with one criminal parent and children with non-criminal parents.

Structural equation models

Criminal and non-criminal fathers

Fig. 2 shows separate models including the frequency and seriousness of offending of criminal as well as non-criminal fathers (n = 432) and mothers (n = 549). The model for fathers provided
an excellent fit to the data, as was indicated by the fit indices ($\chi^2(2) = .95$, $p = .62$; CFI was 1.00, RMSEA was .00). The correlations between the independent variables and the correlations between the error terms of the dependent variables are presented in Table 1. The model explained 28% of the variance in the frequency of the child’s offences and 3% in the mean seriousness of the child’s offences. Moreover, a high number of offences of the child were significantly related to a high number of paternal offences, a lower age of onset, and being male. The older age of onset of the child’s criminal behavior and being male were associated with more serious offending.

**Criminal and non-criminal mothers**

The similar pattern emerged in the model for mothers ($n = 549$). This model provided a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2(2) = 6.20$, $p < .05$; CFI was .99, RMSEA was .06). Table 1 presents the correlations between the independent variables and the correlations between the error terms of the dependent variables. The model explained 23% of the variance of the number of the child’s offences and 2% of the seriousness of the child’s offences (see Fig. 2).

**Criminal fathers**

Fig. 3 shows the models for children with a criminal father ($n = 126$) and/or a criminal mother ($n = 103$). The model for criminal fathers provided an excellent fit to the data, as was indicated by the fit indices ($\chi^2(2) = .83$, $p = .66$; CFI was 1.00, RMSEA was .00). Table 1 presents the correlations between the independent variables and the correlations between the error terms of the dependent variables. The model explained 34% of the variance of the frequency of the child’s

![Image](image-url)
offences, and 7% of the variance of the mean seriousness of the child’s offences. The high frequency of the child’s offences was significantly related to the frequency of the father’s offences and the lower age of onset. Seriousness of the child’s offences was significantly associated with the seriousness of the father’s offences and the lower age of onset of the child. This implies that the more serious the crimes committed by the child, the more serious the crimes of the fathers, and the younger the age that the child started to commit crimes.

Table 1
The correlations between the independent variables and the correlations between the error terms of the dependent variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Model 1a Fathers</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Model 2a Fathers</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seriousness parental offending — frequency parental offending</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriousness parental offending — age of onset of the child</td>
<td>−.27***</td>
<td>−.22***</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency parental offending — age of onset of the child</td>
<td>−.34***</td>
<td>−.37***</td>
<td>−.39***</td>
<td>−.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender child — age of onset of the child</td>
<td>−.13**</td>
<td>−.15***</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>−.18*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variables (error terms)

| Seriousness offending child — frequency offending child      | .04              | .08     | .06              | .12     |

a Model 1 is based on criminal and non-criminal parents, model 2 is based only on criminal parents.
Criminal mothers

The model including data on criminal mothers reveals a different picture (see Fig. 3). The model provided an acceptable fit ($\chi^2(3) = 4.57, \ p = .21$; CFI was .984, RMSEA was .07). The correlations between the independent variables and the correlations between the error terms of the dependent variables are presented in Table 1. This model explained 21% of the variance of the seriousness of the child’s offences and 34% of the variance of the frequency of the child’s offences. This model showed that for children with a criminal mother the frequency of the child’s offences was significantly related to the frequency of the mother’s offences and the lower age of onset. Furthermore, boys were found to conduct more offences than girls. Remarkably, less seriousness of the child’s offences was significantly related to more seriousness of the mother’s offences.

Discussion

This study examined the features of parental criminality, more specifically the seriousness and frequency of offending, and their effects on the criminal behaviors of offenders aged between 8 and 14. Of all juvenile delinquents in our sample, 34% had at least one criminal parent, and 17% had two criminal parents. Our results revealed that children who had a criminal father or a criminal mother committed more crimes compared to children who did not have a criminal parent. This finding is consistent with the literature (Farrington, 1995, 2000; Farrington et al., 2001). Further, children who lived with two criminal parents showed a significantly higher frequency of offending compared to children with one or no criminal parents. As we assume that factors such as family background, social learning processes, and poor parenting practices can explain the strong links between parental criminality and child offences, future research should focus on elucidating these mechanisms.

Criminal and non-criminal parents and offending of the child

Confirming our hypothesis, the results showed that the frequency of parental offending is directly related to the child’s offending, even after controlling for the severity of parental offending. From the social learning theory it can be assumed that modeling processes are at work. Farrington (1995) found that criminal parents are antisocial models for their children, in which aggression and/or antisocial attitudes are central elements. As a consequence of aggressive communication between parents and children, the children learn to react in an aggressive way to solve interaction problems with others (Deković, Janssens, & van As, 2001). According to Crick and Dodge (1994), children’s mental structures (e.g. ‘working models’) are based on experiences of relationships with others and influence the way in which they encode, interpret and respond to social situations. Moreover, when a child is exposed to an ambiguous situation, the response of this child depends on how it sees others based on its mental structure, and whether it is aware of the motivations of the behavior that is showed (Dodge & Rabiner, 2004). Thus, if a child views others acting in a hostile manner and it misinterprets the motivations behind the behavior, it is

1 In this model the near zero association path ‘sex — seriousness of the child’s offences’ was omitted. The fit was acceptable only after omitting this path.
more likely to react in an aggressive way. Consequently, because of their aggressive ways of problem solving, these children are often rejected by their peers, and are attracted to other aggressive children (van Lieshout, Scholte, Haselager, & Cillessen, 2001). The child gradually becomes more involved in a life consisting of criminal activities. But how is this related to the frequency of offending? From the social learning theory it can be assumed that the more criminal the parents are, the more the life of the family is being influenced by criminality. If children are in an environment in which criminality plays an important role every day, it is more likely that the ‘working models’ of these children are characterized by criminality. The same conclusion can be drawn by the control theory. If both parents are criminal and commit crimes with a high frequency, the lives of their children will be more characterized by criminality. This may result in a lower self-control of the child, making it harder to resist criminal intentions. Criminal parents are also more likely to have weak social bonds and often live in bad neighborhoods, where the temptations to show criminal behavior are more present. Having more opportunities to commit crimes may result in a higher frequency of offending by both parents and children. Thereby, living in these neighborhoods is related to fewer opportunities of better living circumstances in the future. More studies are needed to examine these underlying mechanisms.

We also found that being male and having a lower age of onset are related to more frequent offending of the child, which confirms the studies by Alltucker, Bullis, Close, and Yovanoff (2006) and Piquero and Chung (2001). In the study of Alltucker et al. (2006) it appeared that a child with a criminal family member was two times more likely to be an early starter than a child without a criminal family member. The earlier the child starts to show criminal behavior, the more likely he will become a serious criminal, committing crimes with a high frequency (Moffitt, 1993). To spot children who are more likely to become serious offenders will help practice and policy to prevent children from beginning a long criminal career.

**Criminal parents and offending of the child**

Although, within the model, the frequency of parental offending is a stronger predictor than the seriousness of parental offences, by analyzing the model for the children including only criminal fathers and/or mothers, significant relations were found between the seriousness of offending of the child and the seriousness of offending of both parents. For fathers the relationship was positive, which means that the more serious the crimes committed by the child, the more serious the crimes were the father had committed. While the mother’s influence on criminal behavior seems to run through internal processes (e.g., fail to provide warmth and love), the father’s influence seems to run through external processes (e.g., stress at work or being unemployed) and a harsh, negative parenting style (Thornberry, 2005). Children, who experience harsh, negative parenting, are more likely to develop oppositional and aggressive behaviors and to commit more serious crimes.

Concerning mothers, the more serious the crimes of the mother, the less serious the crimes of the child. This is an unexpected result and in contrast to our hypothesis. A possible explanation can be that criminal mothers who commit serious crimes are more likely to be imprisoned, which separates the children from their (generally) primary caregiver. The Child Welfare League of America (2005) reported that in their study, after the imprisonment of the mother, the grandmother raised most children (55%), 20% went to the father, and the remainder went, for example, to a family friend or foster home. The adjustments to a new care-giving environment may be minimal, since the child
already knew the person(s) it has to live with when the mother was incarcerated and may have a more positive relationship with the new primary caregiver. Moreover, Hairston (2003) suggests that the absence of an incarcerated person could prove beneficial, as before the imprisonment the family relationships and living circumstances were less optimal; this change of environment might lead to improved quality of care that might even prevent juvenile delinquency. Phillips (1996) stated that relative caregivers (by providing a stable environment) could help prevent children from being exposed to chaotic or neglectful living conditions that perpetuate the occurrence of problems later on. Another explanation for the finding that children would commit less serious crimes if the mother showed serious offending, is that another primary caregiver took responsibility for the child because the mother was unable to do so on her own. If this primary caregiver provided the child with a caring and stable environment, it would explain the less serious crimes committed in this group of children (Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007).

We found no relation between the frequency of parental offending and the seriousness of offending of the child. That the frequency of parental offending is related to the frequency of the child’s offending, may be because parents involved in regular criminality show poorer parenting practices, talk more about their criminal activities in front of their children, expose their offspring to antisocial norms, and condone the criminal activities of their children. In contrast, children of parents with a low frequency of offending are less exposed to the above factors. Parents who more frequently committed crimes appeared to commit less serious crimes. Whereas frequency is related to the amount of time spent on criminal activities, the impact on their child of crimes by parents depends more on the seriousness of the offence. It would be interesting to investigate the underlying mechanisms of the effects of the frequency of parental offending on the frequency of offending of the child.

Contributions of the present study

Most studies that examined the intergenerational development of delinquency investigated whether parents influence their children concerning criminal behavior, less is known about the frequency and seriousness of parental offending related to the offending of the child. We included both boys and girls in our sample and, also, we included a younger age group (8–14 years). This is especially interesting since the crime rates in this age group are growing in the Netherlands. Thereby, less is known about the influence that the number of crimes of parents and the seriousness of crimes of parents have. Although it is well established that parental criminality is a risk factor for criminality in their children, it is interesting also to know if the number and seriousness of the crimes of both parents matter. This study adds to a better understanding of the influence parents can have on children between 8 and 14 years.

Limitations

Unfortunately, our data do not allow examining the influence of various background variables, such as timing and duration of parental imprisonment, ethnicity, neighborhood characteristics, socio-economic status, financial income, and sibling delinquency. Some other shortcomings of the study need to be addressed as well. First, all the children in our sample had already committed at least one crime according to the local police records. Therefore, we had no control group of
non-criminal children (and their criminal or non-criminal parents) for comparison purposes. It is possible that selection biases play a role. Therefore, caution is warranted when generalising the results. Second, since possible imprisonment of a few parents of our sample was not taken into account some parents may not have been able to commit crimes during certain period(s), which might have artificially lowered the crime rates in the present study. Third, the total sample consisted of 577 children with criminal and non-criminal parents. Dividing this group into one with at least one criminal parent and another with non-criminal parents resulted in smaller subsamples. It should, however, be stressed that also these subsamples provided sufficient statistical powers to yield significant estimates in structural equation models. A final limitation is that the data were based on official police records only. Obviously, this is also strength since we avoided social desirability. On the other hand, in this area of study self-reported data — if reliably measured — are considered worthwhile as many offences may go undetected by the authorities. Future research might focus on collecting data based on both police records and self-reports to acquire more complete information on committed offences.

Implications for further research

Despite these limitations, the current study indicates that children with criminal parents are at higher risk to become involved in criminal activities, in which the frequency and seriousness of parental offending play important roles. Therefore, early interventions will be needed for the child and the entire family in order to prevent these vulnerable children from embarking on a criminal career. At this moment, interventions for the family become more important, and the number of interventions is growing (e.g. Multi System Therapy, see Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998; Functional Family Therapy, see Alexander, Pugh, Parsons, & Sexton, 2000). This study again points to the importance of treating the entire family and not only the child. Further, more research is necessary to clarify the underlying mechanisms of why frequency and seriousness of parental offending is related to offending of the child.

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