

# Family Formation and Crime

Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-110, “[Family Formation and Crime](#),” by Maxim N. Massenkoff, Naval Postgraduate School; and Evan K. Rose, University of Chicago

*Pregnancy triggers sharp declines in arrests rivaling any known intervention, supporting the view that childbirth is a “turning point” that reduces deviant behavior through social bonds.*

While the connection between family formation and crime has received substantial attention in the qualitative literature, quantitative evidence is sparse, and the question of whether—and to what degree—parenthood affects criminal behavior remains open. This paper uses administrative data covering more than a million parents to take an unprecedentedly close look at how parenthood affects criminal behavior. The authors implement a novel match between Washington State administrative records covering the universe of criminal arrests, births, marriages, and divorces—the largest such study ever conducted in the United States.

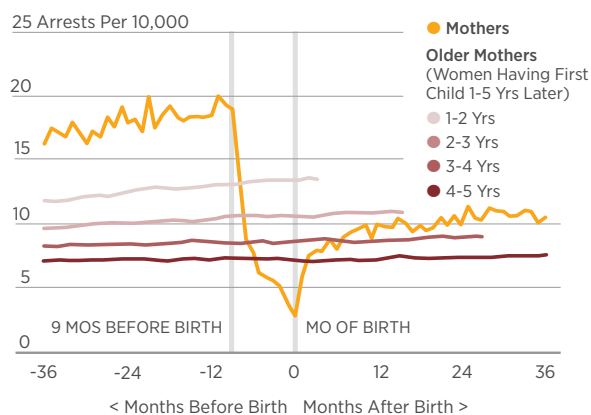
These data allow the authors to highlight high-frequency changes in both the timing and type of arrests, distinguishing between desistance that occurs well before a child is conceived and changes after conception, for example. The data’s scale also allows the authors to precisely measure differences in effects across birth order, child sex, parents’ age, and other characteristics that speak to potential mechanisms and reinforce the robustness of the main results. The authors use two primary research designs: a comparison of the age-crime profiles for men and women who have children at different ages, and a comparison of the crime trajectories of parents to live- vs. still-born children. The main findings are as follows.

## For Mothers

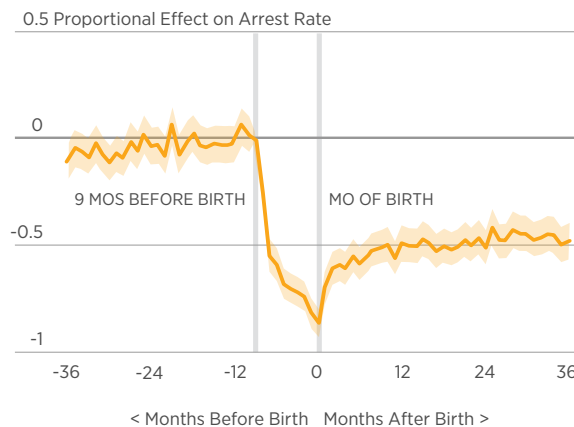
- Drug, alcohol, and economic arrests decline precipitously at the start of pregnancy, bottoming out in the months just before birth. Shortly after birth, criminal arrests recover but ultimately stabilize at about 50 percent below pre-pregnancy levels. These effects are large compared to other commonly studied interventions.
- The sharpness of the response suggests that these declines reflect the impact of pregnancy rather than the onset of a relationship or other coincident life events. Effects are concentrated in the first birth and among unmarried parents. The authors also find similar positive long-term impacts on teen mothers, for whom virtually all pregnancies are unintended, reinforcing the causal interpretation of the main results.

**Figure 1** - Effects for First-Time Mothers

### A) Mothers’ vs. Older Mothers’ Arrest Rates

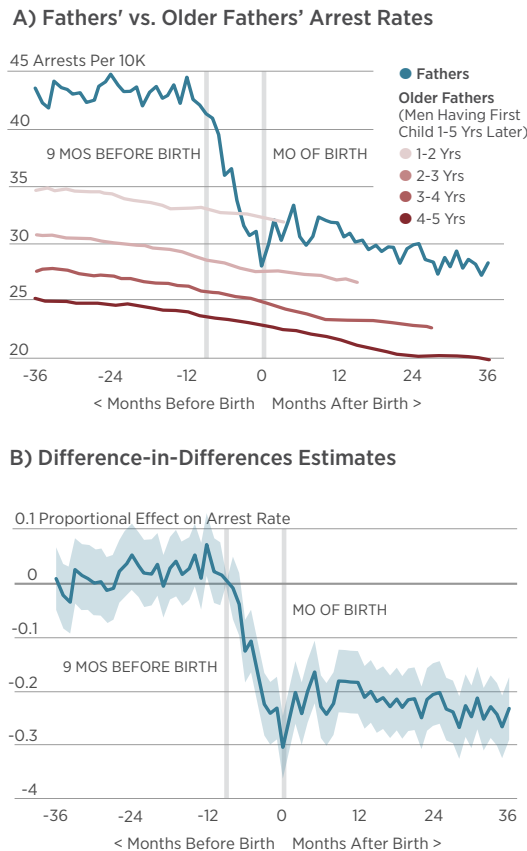


### B) Difference-in-Differences Estimates



Notes: This figure shows difference-in-difference estimates of the effects of childbirth for mothers. Panel A shows average monthly arrest rates around childbirth for mothers and several comparison groups. The outcome is an indicator for any arrest for the crime types plotted in Figure 1. The yellow line plots mothers’ arrest rates in the three years before and after their first child is born. The other lines plot arrest rates over the same ages for women who have their first child 1 to 5 years later. For example, if restricted to the set of women who have their first birth at age 22, the yellow line would plot arrest rates from ages 19 to 25. The lightest red line (1-2 years) would plot arrest rates over the same ages for women who have their first child between ages 23 and 24. Separate comparisons are constructed for each age-at-birth cohort of mothers in the data and averaged, weighting by cohort size. Outcomes for members of each comparison groups are included until 9 months before the first birth in the group, so each counterfactual line stops 9 months before the youngest mother in the group’s birth. Panel B plots averages of regression estimates of Specification 1, which measures effects of births relative to these counterfactuals. Regression effects are divided by the average arrest rates of mothers 9 months before birth to show proportional effects.

**Figure 2** · Effects for First-Time Fathers



Notes: This figure shows difference-in-difference estimates of the effects of childbirth for fathers. Panel A shows average monthly arrest rates around childbirth for fathers and several comparison groups. The outcome is an indicator for any arrest for the crime types plotted in Figure 1. The blue line plots fathers' arrest rates in the three years before and after their first child is born. The other lines plot arrest rates over the same ages for men who have their first child 1 to 5 years later. For example, if restricted to the set of men who have their first birth at age 22, the blue line would plot arrest rates from ages 19 to 25. The lightest red line (1-2 years) would plot arrest rates over the same ages for men who have their first child between ages 23 and 24. Separate comparisons are constructed for each age-at-birth cohort of fathers in the data and averaged, weighting by cohort size. Outcomes for members of each comparison groups are included until 9 months before the first birth in the group, so each counterfactual line stops 9 months before the youngest father in the group's birth. Panel B plots averages of regression estimates of Specification 1, which measures effects of births relative to these counterfactuals. Regression effects are divided by the average arrest rates of fathers 9 months before birth to show proportional effects.

**For Fathers**

- Arrests decrease sharply at the start of the pregnancy and remain at lower levels following birth, with reductions around 20 percent for property, drug, and DUI arrests.

- As with mothers, the timing of fathers' response suggests that pregnancy, not childbirth, is the primary inducement to decreased criminal behavior.
- However, men exhibit a large spike in domestic violence arrests at birth, with monthly rates increasing from below 10 arrests per 10,000 men in the months just before pregnancy to about 15 per 10,000 just after.
- Further, 8 percent of unmarried first-time fathers are arrested for domestic violence within two years following birth. These effects reverse half of the overall decline in arrests from other offenses and are large relative to other known drivers of domestic violence.

**For Marriage**

- Married parents are consistently less likely to be arrested for any offense, including domestic violence. For both sexes, crime decreases dramatically in the three years prior to marriage. This trend stops at the marriage date, after which offending is flat.

While the authors stress that parenthood is not a policy, they do note that governments take numerous actions to prevent teen pregnancy, support marriage through the tax code, and encourage father's involvement in their children's lives. This important new research reveals that some of these policies may have important spillover effects on parents' criminal activity. In particular, the authors' findings on the timing of desistance for fathers suggests that pregnancy could be a uniquely favorable time for interventions promoting additional positive changes. As often occurs in economics, though, there is an "other hand:" In this case, the stark patterns in domestic violence arrests may argue for expanding the purview of home visitation programs in the postnatal period, which are typically directed towards the child's welfare.

Finally, this work offers new insights surrounding teen motherhood and its consequences. In particular, the authors' finding that drug arrests show large decreases after family formation implies that substance abuse may respond to incentives built around social bonds. This explanation aligns with addiction experts who observe the palliative effects of social cohesion (as exemplified, for example, in such programs as Alcoholics Anonymous). Bottom line: Social ties within the family may be a particularly potent source of support for combating addiction.

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