

Marriage, Cohabitation, and Criminal Offending Among Young Adults **Aaron Gottlieb (Princeton University) and Naomi Sugie (Princeton University)**

Over the last 40 years, the family as an institution has changed dramatically. One of the most pronounced changes over this period is the increase in cohabitation and reduction in marriage (Waite, 1995). From 1970 to 2008, the ratio of unmarried couple households to 100 married couple households increased from 1 to 11 (Saluter, 1994; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). These trends suggest that the nature of both marriage and single life are changing (Musick & Bumpass, 2006) and that studies should account for cohabitation (Smock, 2000).

Despite the changing trends in the family, contemporary criminological theories have rarely considered the role of cohabitation in deviance and offending (Lonardo, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2010). Instead, research has continued to investigate the relationship between marriage and deviance, generally finding that marriage protects against offending (Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Farrington & West, 1995; Irwin, 1970; Maume, Ousey, & Beaver, 2005; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006; Shover, 1996; Warr, 1998). The reduction in marriage and increase in cohabitation has been more pronounced among certain populations; for Blacks, 17 percent of coupled households cohabit, compared to 12% for Hispanics, and 8% for Whites (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003). The lack of research on non-traditional partnerships is surprising, given that cohabitation makes up a larger share of coresident unions among those groups most at risk for offending.

In this paper, we help to fill this gap in the literature. We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) to look at the associations among marriage, cohabitation, and deviance in a sample of young men and women. We consider whether marital and cohabiting relationships are protective for sub-populations with different rates of marriage and cohabitation. We then investigate several mechanisms that criminological theory suggests are important aspects of marital partnerships for deterring deviance and offending; we examine how partnership characteristics mediate the association by analyzing the role of relationship quality, stability, and partner status. While this paper contributes new knowledge on the role of cohabitation and offending, our findings concerning mechanisms also offer additional insight into pathways that are not fully considered in contemporary studies of marital relationships.

Theory and Literature

Contemporary theories of criminology generally consider marriage to be a protective factor against delinquent behavior and offending. These scholars suggest that life-course transitions such as marriage have the potential to deter future offending and to strengthen commitment to non-deviant lifestyles, even among those with serious offending histories (Laub & Sampson, 2001). While some scholars have eschewed the importance of life-course transitions and argue that early childhood factors are the most critical determinants of offending trajectories (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, Moffit, 1993), most contemporary research supports the protective role of marriage (Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Farrington & West, 1995; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Maume, Ousey, & Beaver, 2005; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sampson et al., 2006; Shover, 1996; Warr, 1998).

Researchers have identified several ways that marriage deters offending. First, marriage can foster interdependent systems of obligation, support, and restraint that make it more costly to engage in criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Qualitative research finds that the act of getting married and being in a committed relationship can strengthen social bonds and ties (Laub & Sampson, 2003); as a result, individuals may feel that "more is at stake" by engaging in

deviant behavior. In addition to the informal social controls exerted by strengthened social bonds, scholars propose that female spouses may assert direct social control over their counterparts (Sampson et al., 2006; Umberson, 1992). Related to this, marriage can change everyday routines towards conventional lifestyles, reducing potential contact with deviant peers. Mark Warr finds individuals spend much less time with friends once they are married and that this change in time-use can explain lower levels of offending (1998). Finally, marriage can change the mindset of men (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002); by taking the step toward marriage, men may feel that it is time to grow up and become more inclined to avoid deviant behavior (Sampson et al., 2006). Through these various ways, marriage can serve as a critical life course event, catalyzing desistance from offending.

The limited literature on cohabitation provides conflicting evidence about its potential as a protective factor. Research on cohabitation and substance use has found that cohabitation serves as a deterrent, albeit to a lesser extent, than marriage (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006; Lonardo et al., 2010). The studies looking at deviant, criminal behavior provide mixed results, with some finding that it does not protect against deviant behavior (Horney et al., 1995; Lonardo et al., 2010; Piquero, MacDonald, & Parker, 2002) and another finding that cohabitation is a deterrent (Sampson et al., 2006). Each of these studies, however, has certain limitations that we are able to address: they focus only on people with histories of substantial contact with the criminal justice system (Horney et al., 1995; Piquero et al., 2002); rely on a small sample of individuals from one metropolitan area and a binary deviance outcome (Lonardo et al., 2010); or consider older cohorts that predate the changing trends in family (Sampson et al., 2006).

In this paper, we propose that modern cohabiting relationships can serve some, if not all, of the deterrence functions of marriage. For example, cohabiting partnerships can strengthen social bonds, exert control, and change time-use patterns in the ways described above. Cohabiting relationships may also represent a turning point for individuals, although perhaps not to the same degree entailed by getting married. Prior scholarship has emphasized that it is not marriage itself, *per se*, but commitment to a rewarding and high-quality partnership (Sampson & Laub, 1993) or the stability of the partnership (Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2008) that is most important. In this paper, we analyze these various propositions using several approaches.

First, we distinguish the role of cohabitation by race and ethnicity. For some racial groups, cohabitation makes up a larger share of all coresident unions than it does for other groups. Moreover, research suggests that the meaning of cohabitation varies by race and ethnicity (Smock, 2000; Trask & Koivunen, 2007). For example, cohabitation among Whites is much more likely to lead to marriage than it is for Blacks (Manning & Smock, 1995), suggesting that it may represent a stronger partnership and a more serious commitment. For this reason, we expect that the protective effects of cohabitation may be particularly strong for Whites. Second, we consider partnership length as a direct measure of commitment. We propose that individuals in partnerships of longer duration will be less likely to engage in deviant behavior. Third, we measure relationship quality. We expect that higher quality relationships will be more transformative for changing offending patterns. Fourth, we consider whether the romantic partner is a “good” influence by measuring whether she or he has higher educational attainment than the respondent and whether he or she is employed.

Data, Measures, and Methods

To examine these questions, we use data from the NLSY97 survey. The NLSY97 is a nationally representative panel data set of 8,984 youths who ranged from 12 to 16 years of age as of December 31, 1996, with questions focusing on the transition of youth from school to work

and into adulthood (Moore, Pedlow, Krishnamurty, & Wolter, 2000). The first round of interviews occurred in 1997; since then, interviews have occurred annually resulting in 13 total interview rounds, with the ages of respondents in the last round ranging from 25 to 30 (NLSY, 2011). For this analysis, we use data from the 1998-2003 waves. We exclude more recent survey waves because questions on deviance were asked to all respondents through 2003 only. Additionally, we exclude data from the 1997 wave in order to consider respondents who are at least 18 years of age. After multiply imputing data on covariates with missing cases, we have a sample consisting of 31,161 person-years of young men and women (N=8,608), ranging in age from 18 to 23.

We measure our dependent variable, deviance, in the form of a crime variety scale, as is commonly done in criminological research (Osgood, McMorris, & Potenza, 2002). Respondents are asked whether they committed each of the following 6 criminal acts since the date of the last interview: intentionally destroyed property, stole items worth less than \$50, stole items worth more than \$50, committed other property crimes, attacked someone with the intention of seriously harming them, and sold illegal drugs. We sum the responses to each of the six questions, with 6 indicating the highest level of offending and 0 indicating no offending. Our key independent variable is relationship status, which we code as married, cohabiting, and single. Because of the detailed, longitudinal nature of the NLSY97 survey, we are able to include numerous control variables. These measures include socioeconomic characteristics, parent's educational attainment, and prior measures of cognitive ability, emotional health, delinquent peers, gang affiliation, and delinquent behavior.

To test the main association between deviant behavior and relationship status, as well as the proposed mechanisms described above, we use several negative binomial regression models. We rely on negative binomial regressions because our main dependent variable (deviance) is an overdispersed count variable, meaning that the variance is greater than the mean (Osgood, 2000). Given the longitudinal nature of our data, we use random effects models and fixed effects models with limited covariates to describe between- and within-person associations.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary results suggest that both marriage and cohabitation protect against deviant behavior. In our full sample, compared to being single, cohabitation is associated with a 0.11 unit decrease in deviant behavior in the random effects model and a 0.19 unit reduction in the fixed effects model. As expected, the association between marriage and deviance is stronger than the relationship between cohabitation and deviance. Compared to being single, being married is associated with a 0.74 unit decrease in the random effects model and a 0.70 unit reduction in the fixed effects model. These findings suggest that cohabitation serves an important protective role against deviant behavior, but that marriage is an even stronger deterrent.

After establishing the basic association, we analyze the role of cohabitation and marriage across racial groups. Stratifying by race, we find that the negative association holds across all groups; however, there is heterogeneity in effect size and significance level. For Blacks, we find that cohabitation reduces deviance by 0.09 units in the random effects model and 0.14 in the fixed effects model, neither of which is statistically significant. The protective association of marriage, however, remains; being married is associated with a 0.52 unit reduction in the random effects model and a 0.60 reduction in the fixed effects model. Among white respondents, we find that cohabitation significantly reduces deviance by 0.13 and 0.20 in the random effects and fixed effects models, respectively, and that marriage is associated with a 0.64 and a 0.60 unit decrease, respectively. Among Hispanics, cohabitation is similarly consequential. It is associated with a

0.15 unit decrease in the random effects model and a 0.26 decrease in the fixed effects model. Interestingly, the protective association of marriage is the largest for Hispanics, where marriage is associated with a 0.98 and 0.93 unit decrease in random and fixed effects models, respectively. To further to test for heterogeneity, we will conduct chow tests to see whether the relationship status coefficients across groups are significantly different from one another.

To better understand these associations, we will look at the following mechanisms: relationship quality, relationship stability, and partner employment and relative educational attainment. Research suggests that cohabitation is characterized by lower levels of stability (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004) and relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996) than marriage. Moreover, research shows that perceived financial stability serves as a major barrier to marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). This suggests that individuals who choose to marry are likely to have partners with high levels of education and employment—partners that are good influences. Prior scholarship has identified these relationship and partner characteristics to be important mediators for marriage and criminal offending (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). In this paper, we expect that the protective role of cohabitation will be stronger and more closely aligned to the role of marriage once we adjust for these mediating characteristics.

Given the increasing prevalence of cohabitation, this paper will make an important contribution to the study of demography, crime and family. We also expect that researchers interested in the role of marriage and crime will find new evidence concerning the explanatory mechanisms. To our knowledge, this is the first examination of mechanisms for partnerships that focuses on both married and cohabiting relationships and utilizes contemporary data.

Table 1: Marriage, Cohabitation, and Crime: Main Associations, for full sample and by race

	Deviance (Random Effects)		Deviance (Fixed Effects)	
<i>Full Sample</i>				
Cohabiting	-0.11	(0.05)*	-0.19	(0.06)**
Married	-0.74	(0.09)**	-0.70	(0.11)**
<i>Black Respondents</i>				
Cohabiting	-0.09	(0.10)	-0.15	(0.12)
Married	-0.52	(0.27) †	-0.60	(0.30)*
<i>White Respondents</i>				
Cohabiting	-0.13	(0.07)*	-0.20	(0.08)**
Married	-0.64	(0.13)**	-0.60	(0.15)**
<i>Hispanic Respondents</i>				
Cohabiting	-0.15	(0.10)	-0.26	(0.12)*
Married	-0.98	(0.18)**	-0.93	(0.21)**

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. † p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Sample sizes are: Full sample (N=8,608), Black respondents (N=2,263), White respondents (N=4,442), Hispanic respondents (N=1,822)

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