Intergenerational offending: The case for exploring resistance

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Abstract

Intergenerational offending refers to the observed phenomenon that offending tends to run in families. As small groups of families have been shown to be responsible for a considerable proportion of crime, there has been a substantial amount of effort expended in researching both the prevalence and patterns of such crime. The mechanisms by which intergenerational continuity of offending is generated, however, are not well understood. Perhaps more importantly, there is even less understanding about those factors that may *prevent* intergenerational offending. Given the strong focus on examining risk factors for offending, the observation that the majority of children in families where there is parental offending do not go on to become offenders themselves seems to have become lost in the discussion. This article presents a brief overview of research that aims to understand the intergenerational transmission of offending, but then goes on to argue that we need to develop our understanding of protective factors and resistance as well if we are to improve our efforts at prevention. An understanding of the internal and external resources and strategies utilised by those who resist criminal behaviour will enable researchers and policy makers to rigorously examine and verify these, and implement relevant supportive strategies.

Key words: resilience, resistance, desistance, intergenerational offending, risk factors, protective factors

Introduction

It is both right and reasonable for researchers and policy makers to be concerned with crime prevention and the maintenance of safe communities. Recent evidence has shown that crime tends to cluster within families (e.g. see van der Weijer et al., 2014), with a small group of families being responsible for a considerable proportion of offences committed (Farrington, 2011). As a result, there has been a focus in recent decades on understanding the intergenerational transmission of

criminal behaviour, with particular emphasis on identifying risk factors. But the *mechanisms* by which these intergenerational patterns are generated are not well understood and even less is known about how such patterns may be resisted (Flynn, 2013; Luther, 2015). There is, however, growing recognition that both resilience (Richardson, 2002; Lösel and Farrington, 2012;) - the ability to thrive despite adversity - and social capital, allow those in challenging situations to 'get on' (Putnam, 2000). This increasing recognition should encourage us to learn about the experiences of those from 'criminal families' who do *not* engage in offending, in order to provide a complete picture of the mechanisms of resistance. Understanding these protective factors and mechanisms will then allow us to build and support our efforts with regard to crime prevention, and community safety, more effectively.

Understanding intergenerational offending

According to Flynn (2013), current knowledge about intergenerational trends in offending has been developed primarily in two ways. First, there has been some examination of retrospective intergenerational trends as a component of broader studies, typically involving adult prison populations. These studies have sought self-reports from inmates about their family histories of offending and imprisonment. A number of both larger and smaller studies in the U.S. focusing on imprisoned parents, both male and female (see: Stanton, 1980; Baunach, 1985; Glaze and Maruschak, 2010), conclude that around 50% of participants have family members who have also experienced incarceration. Despite a range of methodological limitations in this research (e.g. varied definitions of 'family member'; varied measurements of offending; no matching of comparison groups, etc.), a clear intergenerational trend has been identified, with fathers regularly described by around 20% of participants as having been to prison. The clearest trend, however, is *within* generations, with brothers the most commonly reported family member engaged in offending. The fact that an equal proportion of prisoners do *not* report any family member with a history of imprisonment has received little attention from researchers.

A second approach to investigating intergenerational trends in offending involves research that has sought specifically to examine patterns of offending. This research has been based on large community data sets, either generated prospectively or collected from existing state-held data. The two seminal studies in this area are the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD)* in England and the *Transfive* Study in The Netherlands. A third - the *Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS)* in the U.S. – is also often drawn from in discussions in this field. There has been considerable collaboration amongst these studies, and a small group of researchers have subsequently shaped much of our knowledge and ways of thinking about intergenerational patterns of offending. These studies have

known and accepted limitations. Despite large sample sizes and solid longitudinal data, at times combining self-report with official records and over a number of generations, the data were collected in very different historical and social contexts. Moreover, the *CSDD* and the *PYS* concentrated only on boys. As a result, each sample is quite homogenous, such that broad generalisation of the findings is limited.

Risk factors

Much of the research on intergenerational patterns of offending has focused on identifying risk factors. Farrington's (2011) narrative review of research into predictors of the transmission of offending concludes that a "bewildering variety" (p. 131) of constructs have been examined, using a variety of methods; as a result, it is difficult to draw unequivocal conclusions. He does, however, argue that parental offending, conviction and imprisonment is the strongest predictor of intergenerational offending. Goodwin and Davis' (2011: 2) in-depth investigation of six 'crime families' in Australia draws a similar conclusion and notes that there is evidence for "the criminality of the father being particularly influential". Farrington (2011) further poses six possible explanations for observed intergenerational trends: ongoing exposure to broader risk factors (e.g. poverty); assortative mating (developing intimate relationships with others involved in offending[1]); direct mutual influences of family members on each other (e.g. siblings); mediation by environmental factors; transmission of genetic traits; and official bias (i.e. these families are more 'known' to law enforcement, and therefore more highly scrutinised).

In recent years, data from both the *Transfive* and *CSDD* have been used specifically to investigate some of these individual factors. Using *CSDD* data, Besemer et al. (2013) examined official bias - that police and the court system have closer oversight of 'known' families and that these individuals are subsequently more likely to be caught and prosecuted, and hence feature in crimes statistics. The researchers assumed a range of 'biasing' variables, such as having a convicted parent, being of low family socio-economic status and living in poor housing. They examined self-reported offending by participants alongside official convictions, comparing participants with a biasing variable present with those with no such variable present. Higher conviction rates were evident for all participants

[1] The issue of "assortive mating" issue has attracted considerable debate. Besemer (2014) sums up an opposing view that assortive mating is not a mechanism in and of itself. She argues that while it shows that transmission of intergenerational patterns of offending is stronger when there are two parents, rather than one, engaged in offending, the actual transmission is explained by a range of other factors, such as genetics, environmental factors etc.

with biasing variables, with the strongest factor being parental criminal record. Low family income, poor housing and a father's poor job record also increased convictions. Given that the data were gathered in a specific historical and social context and involved only male participants, the authors conclude that whilst official bias has some impact on observed patterns of intergenerational offending, it cannot be claimed to be solely responsible. Of interest, but not explored in Besemer et al.'s (2013) research, are those offspring not engaged in offending.

Besemer (2014) also sought to explore whether specific characteristics of parental offending – particularly timing and frequency - have an influence on offspring offending. Drawing on police records for all direct study (male) participants (N=411), along with male and female siblings (total N=1184) and their parents, the study found that while frequency of parental conviction was positively related to children's conviction rate, timing of offences was more complex. Whilst those children whose parents had only been convicted before their birth had a greater number of convictions than those whose parents had never been convicted, there were no significant differences in the conviction rates of children whose parents offended during their different stages of childhood. As this paper also examined sibling experiences, there is some capacity to comment on gender. Data indicate that, similar to male participants, female siblings with a convicted parent showed higher conviction rates that those whose parent/s did not have any convictions. However, when comparing brothers/sisters, female siblings show lower rates of conviction than males, even though raised in the same families. Gender is an interesting issue in studies on intergenerational offending: typically it is either overlooked, with boys' experiences seen to be indicative of all children, or the different patterns shown by boys and girls are simply noted and described. Any role that gender may play in resistance specifically has not been considered.

Besemer's (2014) findings provide some evidence both for and against the transmission of innate traits, as well as evidence for both the transmission of broader environmental risk factors and mediation by environmental factors. Some evidence for a criminogenic environment is also provided by Besemer and Farrington's (2012) comparison of the offspring of offenders (with both chronic and sporadic offending) with those of non-offenders. Children of convicted fathers were more likely to be convicted themselves; however, the intensity of the fathers' offending was not influential or replicated in their sons or daughters. Again, it is of interest to see in these data a considerable pattern of resistance in offspring that is little mentioned. For example, of the 230 boys whose fathers were either sporadic or chronic offenders, 81% were either non-offenders or had desisted

from offending. That the majority of children in families where there is parental offending do not go on to repeat this behaviour seems to have been omitted from this discussion.

Aspects of the *Transfive* data have been used most recently by van der Wiejer and colleagues to investigate the transmission of violent crime (van der Wiejer et al., 2014) – an issue of particular public concern in many jurisdictions currently - and to examine further the impact of parental divorce on violent offending in offspring (van de Weijer et al., 2015). Using the most recent three generations of data, van der Wiejer et al. (2014) found that, similar to Besemer (2014), boys exposed during childhood to paternal violent behaviour were more likely to engage in similar behaviour than those whose fathers' convictions preceded their birth. They were also more likely to show continuity of behaviour than boys exposed to non-violent crimes. The authors suggest that this is due to the impact of exposure and learning, with children more likely to be directly exposed to parents' violent crimes (i.e. in the home) than to non-violent crimes, such as theft or fraud, although limited evidence was presented in support of this contention. The co-existence of other protective or risk factors in either sub-group was not explored. Van de Weijer et al. (2015) do, however, provide some interesting comment on unexpected protective factors in their examination of the impact of divorce on intergenerational offending. Their findings indicate that in families where there are non-violent offences, divorce adds to risk, with offspring also being more likely to be convicted of a similar crime. Conversely, where parental offending has been violent, intergenerational continuity is evident only in families that did not divorce.

Protective factors

Although several of these studies have touched on protective factors, often inadvertently or as a by-product of the main discussion, little research has specifically focused on explaining how or why most children in 'criminal families' do not go on to offend. There has been a call in more recent years (e.g. see Poehlmann and Eddy, 2013:2) for research to "not overshadow our examination of possible resilience processes in these children" and to remember that some children with these experiences thrive and do well, despite adversity. Indeed, it is argued by Luther (2015) that focusing all of our attention on risks and problems impedes the development of helpful policies and services.

Lösel and Farrington (2012) explicitly examined protective factors with regard to the development of youth violence; they present a narrative review of some 112 longitudinal studies published between 1990 and 2009. The authors conclude that a range of factors have some protective impact. Unsurprisingly, given the broader resilience literature (Centre on the Developing Child, 2015), these

include individual, familial and community factors. Individual traits such as above-average intelligence, easy temperament and pro-social attitudes were identified, while influential familial factors included a close relationship with at least one parent and clear parental supervision. Social factors, such as strong bonds with the school, non-offending peers and a non-disadvantaged neighbourhood environment were highlighted as factors protecting against involvement in youth violence. In a small study in the U.S., Luther (2015) examined how social support provided through interpersonal relationships affects resilience. This research was conducted with a group of adults (N=32) who had experienced parental imprisonment as children, and who were deemed to be doing well on the basis of their college student status. Findings indicate that these relationships provided children with access to 'normal' childhood activities and pro-social connections, a view of their life/opportunities which did not involve offending, and practical and emotional support at key turning points in their lives. Although not discussed by the author, another interpretation of these findings is that the identified processes foster, construct and resource an alternative, positive identify for children.

New narratives

In related fields a different narrative is evident. When discussing the intergenerational impact of child abuse for example, the strong message is that not all children who experience abuse will go on to abuse. Indeed, Kaufman and Zigler (1993, cited in Dixon et al., 2009: 25) argue that "intergenerational transmission of abuse is overrated". U.K. research by Dixon et al. (2009) examining the intergenerational patterns of child maltreatment in 4,351 families concluded, similar to research into offending, that intergenerational cycles are complex and are the result of intersecting factors. They report key protective mechanisms as financial stability-solvency and social support. They also argue strongly (citing Ertem et. al, 2000) that it is vital to look at discontinuation of cycles - what helps children and families develop resilience and to do well despite adverse circumstances.

Similarly, there has been considerable growth in recent decades of scholarship and research in the area of desistance from crime (e.g. see Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). Resistance, with which we are primarily concerned in this paper, and desistance are clearly different concepts. The latter, although acknowledged as difficult to define (Maruna, 2001), implies moving away from a previous pattern of offending behaviour, whereas resistance implies primary diversion – not becoming involved in offending in the first place. There is one key similarity, however, which makes a brief discussion of desistance helpful to the argument: both ideas seek to capture the processes involved where there

is an absence of offending. Weaver and McCulloch (2012:7) argue that there is evidence to suggest that desistance may be supported by fostering a positive sense of self through "generativity, volunteering, help-giving behaviours, advocacy or activism". In one of the few studies in this area, LeBel et. al, (2015) sought to explore these ideas by comparing the experiences, attitudes and coping of formerly incarcerated people employed in prison re-integration programs (n=29) with those of the programs' clients (n=229). The findings indicated that those engaged as staff experienced less stigma, expressed greater life satisfaction and were generally more positive about their life chances. The authors concluded that these accrued benefits are the result of participation and the opportunity to 'give back'. Framing a positive and pro-social identity (LeBel et. al, 2015) by helping others builds on Maruna's (2001) argument that offenders can 'make good' by creating new narratives around reform and personal change. But a changed view of self and new skills/attitudes are not sufficient on their own. The opportunity to enact this identity, to apply these skills and attitudes, and arguably, to have these reinforced is necessary. Weaver and Nicholson (2012) argue that being involved in helping activities can also mitigate stigma and restore relationships between offenders and their environments. These ideas can be useful for developing our understanding of resistance: what is the nature of the social bonds that non-offending family members have, both within and beyond the family; what personal narrative have they constructed; what opportunities are there for them to 'exercise [their] capacities' (McNeill, 2006: 50), including the capacity to help others (LeBel et. al, 2015)?

Conclusion

It is evident that, if we are to improve our preventative efforts and find effective and successful ways of reducing offending and enhancing community safety, we need to more fully grasp the nature and drivers of resistance. Much attention and research has been focused on identifying risk factors. Yet, even where research has examined such risk factors, the important issue of gender differences has largely been overlooked. Perhaps gender enables resistance in some ways. If so, how? This is a clear area for future research. This paper has also challenged current approaches to crime prevention, as well as highlighted related fields, whose narrative and approach we can learn from, including child abuse, desistance and resiliency. Recent developments in the latter have moved from attempting to uncover the specific individual qualities that allow individuals to succeed despite high-risk environments, to a focus on understanding the experiences and conditions which foster resilience (Richardson, 2002). In general terms resilience is seen to be aided by individuals having a sense of agency, opportunities to develop adaptive skills, supportive adult-child relationships, and access to wider supports – which support a sense of identity and belonging (Center on Child Development,

2015). Examination of associated materials in this article indicates the relevance of exploring these ideas to further our understanding of the processes which support resisting offending.

Given the existing evidence about the long-term impacts of parental imprisonment and the accepted view of families of offenders as disadvantaged and often socially excluded (Murray, 2007), understanding how children of offenders access and make use of social bonds or social capital – the "connections between and among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000:19) - is relevant. This issue needs to be examined alongside the nature and impact of relationships with supportive and consistent adults; children's opportunities to foster a positive identity and pro-social bonds in interactions with others and to enact that identity; and importantly the resources required. An understanding of the internal and external resources and strategies utilised by those who resist offending will enable researchers and policy makers to examine rigorously and verify these, so as to shape more effective prevention and early intervention efforts.

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