

## NEWS RELEASE

### CRIME IS CONTAGIOUS, ACCORDING TO NEW RESEARCH THAT REVEALS HOW TEENAGE FATHERS TURN AWAY FROM CRIME IF THEY HAVE A SON

Preventing one criminal act can prevent a significant number of additional crimes, according to research by Professor Christian Dustmann, director of the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM) at UCL, and senior researcher Rasmus Landersø from the Rockwool foundation.

Their study finds that very young fathers who have their first child while they are still teenagers subsequently commit less crime if the child is a boy than if it is a girl.

According to the research, this then has a spill over effect on other young men of a similar age living in the same neighbourhoods as the young father. It means that the less crime there is committed by fathers of new-born sons, the less crime is committed by their peer groups.

The researchers analysed data on all fathers in Denmark aged between 15 and 20 whose first child was born between the years 1991 and 2004, tracking their criminal behaviour and that of their peers in the first five years following the birth of the child.

Their findings provide evidence that criminal behaviour is contagious – and they indicate the wider potential value of policies to reduce crime. In the data, the derived effect of preventing one criminal act is that over the next two years, four other crimes are not committed. Over five years, around six other crimes are avoided.

#### **Contagious criminal behaviour**

It has long been assumed that one person's criminal behaviour influences another person's criminal behaviour. That assumption lies behind a number of crime prevention programmes: for example, 'kingpin' strategies, in which the police aim to apprehend the key person in a network; and mentor programmes, in which maladjusted young people are introduced to people who can act as positive role models.

Three possible explanations have been put forward as to why some groups exhibit a particularly high level of criminality:

- \* The first is that a group behaves uniformly because its members live or spend their time in the same surroundings and are subject to the same influences – for example, from run-down buildings, mess, graffiti, etc. The external influences make these people more criminal.
- \* The second is that the members of the group resemble one another. They may all come from socially disadvantaged families, which means they behave in a similar manner and commit crimes.
- \* The third is that the criminal behaviour of group members affects each other, indicating that crime is a social phenomenon – and contagious.

Although this study supports the third connection, it does not mean the first two don't also contribute to explaining the criminality in a group. However, the key difference is that when

criminal behaviour is contagious, initiatives to reduce one person's criminal behaviour will also have a derived effect on the behaviour of others – a 'social multiplier effect'. As a result, the positive effects of crime prevention measures may be significantly underestimated.

The study's co-author Prof Dustmann said: "Our finding that there are spillovers in criminal behaviour are important for our understanding of crime as a social phenomenon." The study has key implications for crime prevention policies: "Because one person's criminal behaviour affects the criminal behaviour of his peers, we will underestimate the positive benefits of crime prevention initiatives if we only focus on the effects of individuals in isolation."

### **The criminal behaviour of young fathers**

It has long been suspected that parenthood and family represents a potential route out of criminality, but until now it has been difficult to demonstrate a causal connection between parenthood, family roles and criminality.

This study demonstrates that the way in which young fathers with a criminal background react to the role of fatherhood differs according to the sex of the child. Many of the very young fathers had criminal backgrounds, but if their child was a son, they subsequently committed significantly less crime than if the child was a girl. Thus, the family can be an important element in the route out of a criminal trajectory.

Source: Child's Gender, Young Fathers' Crime, and Spillover Effects in Criminal Behavior, CReAM DP 05/18, [http://www.cream-migration.org/publ\\_uploads/CDP\\_05\\_18.pdf](http://www.cream-migration.org/publ_uploads/CDP_05_18.pdf)

By Christian Dustmann and Rasmus Landersø

1) For more information or interview requests please contact Professor Christian Dustmann on +44 (0)20 3549 5356, email: [c.dustmann@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:c.dustmann@ucl.ac.uk)

2) The paper / press release is embargoed until 00.01 UK time Tuesday 15 May 2018

### **About UCL's Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM)**

CReAM is an independent and interdisciplinary research centre within UCL Economics. CReAM's research focuses on labour economics and migration. CReAM aims at informing the public debate on in the UK and in Europe by providing new insight, helping to steer the current policy debate in a direction that is based on carefully researched evidence without partisan bias. CReAM contributes to the development of new theories and methodological advances in data analysis, ensuring the ability to contribute and inform on a wide range of issues of policy concern, and establishing a reputation for analysis that is accepted as open, transparent and reliable.