

Youth Crime, Fatherhood and the Role of Ethnicity

Youth crime is a key point of discussion in the 2023 election. Far-reaching policy changes, including boot camps and stricter sentences, are suggested to deter adolescents from committing crimes. However, the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of punitive measures to deter crime remains limited and ambiguous. Among the few known interventions that can have a long-lasting effect is parenthood. It is well-documented in the academic literature that childbirths are associated with sharper declines in arrests than most policy-based reforms. In other words, parenthood is a major turning point, especially for young male perpetrators, steering them away from their criminal past and towards a more responsible future.

Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that a child's gender plays an important role for some fathers. Recent research using Danish administrative data reveals that young fathers are more inclined to give up crime when they have a son rather than a daughter. However, it is important to consider the generalisability of this relationship, as cultural attributes and traditional values may also determine a father-child relationship.

We examined a fathers' behavioural response to their child's gender in the New Zealand context. We sought to understand the long-term changes in young fathers' criminal activities, employment, education, and relationship status. We used Statistics New Zealand's large research database, the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), to examine the effect of a child's gender on young fathers' behavioural outcomes. The IDI links different administrative data sets to provide a broad picture of the various activities of Aotearoa's population.

Using Department of Internal Affairs birth records, we tracked the data footprint of young fathers aged between 17 to 21 whose first child was born between January 2005 and December 2010. Through Ministry of Justice court charges data, we documented how the criminal behaviour of young first-time fathers changed over a period that spanned from two years pre-childbirth up to 10 years post-childbirth. The Inland Revenue's tax records were used to track the fathers' employment trajectory over the same period. Additionally, we investigated the 2013 Census to explore the effect of a child's gender on educational attainment and family formation.

The sample of fathers included in our research had similar life trajectories before they became a parent, thereby ensuring that any changes in their post-childbirth behaviour could be attributed to the effects prompted by their child's gender.

We found that fatherhood triggered a sharp instantaneous drop in criminal behaviour. However, some young fathers changed their behaviour more drastically and enduringly when they had a son rather than a daughter – but this was only observed for young New Zealand European fathers who had prior convictions before childbirth. Over the 10 years post-childbirth, previously convicted European fathers with a son had 17.2% fewer convictions on average than those with a daughter. When only considering serious sentences such as imprisonment or home detention, the average difference was 11.4% over the decade after the child's birth. The relationship was particularly noticeable for fathers with offences related to burglary, dangerous acts, drugs, or fraudulent activities.

Importantly, the effects of a child's gender also influenced the father's labour market behaviour. Specifically, we found a stronger commitment to remain employed and higher accumulated earnings for fathers with a son than those with a daughter. Over the 10 years after a child's birth, the aggregated income of fathers with a son was 21.5% higher and the number of months receiving benefits was 21.6% lower compared to fathers with a daughter. We also found that having no qualification was more common among young fathers with a daughter. Further, having a son increased the likelihood of being in a partnered relationship.

We also saw a strong drop in criminal convictions among Māori fathers after child's birth. However, we did not find any relevant evidence that indicated Māori fathers responded differently based on their child's gender, including across crime and labour market indicators. These results suggest that the preference for sons is perhaps more prevalent among Europeans or in Western societies. Therefore, we recommend that policymakers be mindful of the demographic differences when generalising the results derived from a homogenous sample of individuals in the context of a more diverse population.

Our study indicates that people from different social and cultural backgrounds respond differently to important milestones in their life. As a result, policy interventions designed based on research that is unable to account for population diversity could be ineffective for certain demographic groups, potentially depriving them of the social benefits of research-driven policy interventions.