

# Critical thinking on warr on criminal desistance

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



Mark Warr carries out his research using a paper by Sampson and Laub (1993) as a starting point. Sampson and Laub have proposed that life-course transitions such as marriage, employment, and entry into the military may have significant effect on criminal behavior. Sampson and Laub had also sought to examine criminal behavior over a subject's entire life and not just the teenage years. They carried out this research on data from the 1950s which has been known for its comprehensiveness. They had found that marriage and job stability had significant effect on criminal behavior in adulthood. Warr argues that their analysis is not perfect and needs further refining. He posits that Sampson and Laub did not adequately examine the causes of desistance from crime in early adulthood and stuck to their original hypothesis without exploring the possibility of other factors playing a part in the subject's desistance. While the earlier paper suggests that marriage has a factor in reducing deviant behavior due to the subject now being part of the institution of marriage and thus having a stronger relationship with societal institutions. Warr suggests that marriage is a factor in reducing deviant behavior due to the fact that the subject now spends less time with delinquent friends and associates and since most of the offences are carried out when part of a group of delinquents, the number of offenses carried out by the subject decreases. In effect, his position is that the greatest factor in explaining a desistance from crime is the changing relationships with a subject's peers and that is the main relationship researched in the paper. Marriage is merely the instrument that causes this change in relationship. The data he uses is from the National Youth Survey and is a longitudinal set of 1,725 individuals in 1976. There may be several problems with the data.

Firstly, 1976 is a long time ago and the demographics of average person demonstrating criminal behavior may have changed vastly since then and with it the deterrents and motivations of criminal behavior. The data itself was collected by asking subjects questions, the veracity of the answers to which cannot be determined beyond absolute doubt. The questions itself are slightly problematic as they are asked on a sliding. Discrete scale so there are no shades to the answers, for example - " On the weekends, how much time have you generally spent with your friends? (5 = a great deal; 4 = quite a bit; 3 = some; 2= not too much; 1 = very little)" (1998: 5) which would be better with some sort of a measure for declaring the exact number of hours over a month. Since the data used is only for people between 11 and 17, it may be interesting to examine the differences in character and susceptibility to a life of crime and ages at marriage. His model only goes up to 24 year olds and we might find a link between early marriages and crime rates, the point being that people who marry at different ages may react differently within a marriage in terms of committing crimes. It should be expanded to older people to form a complete picture of how marriage really affects desistance. Maybe people who wish to leave behind a life of crime seek out marriages which would spin the cause-effect alignment.

One problem may be in the cause-effect relationship between spending time with delinquent friends and getting involved in criminal offenses. Warr seems to suggest that after marriage time spent with delinquent friends decreases which causes a fall in criminal behavior but in his discussion of the Knight and West (1975) paper he offers a quote from an offender - " As one offender put it, " To keep out of trouble, that's why I don't go round them no more . . .

"I don't hang around with a lot of mates or anything like that"(1998: 3) - which would suggest that there is a desire to commit less criminal acts which causes the fall in time spent with delinquent friends.

He, himself raises an important point -" critics may raise legitimate questions about the timing or causal order of events. Of greatest concern is this question: Do changes in peer relations precede or follow marriage, and are the two events proximate in time during the life course?" (1998: 14) and answers by saying that the conditions that marriage brings about would have been prevalent before marriage as the relationship that exists between the married couple would have existed even before the actual act of marriage and thus the same effects would be observed. Even if that is so, that is exactly why we cannot say for sure that marriage is a factor in the diminishing relationships with peers, because these diminishments would have started before marriage according to his own explanation. However, the data seems to clearly show the large difference between time spent with friends before and after marriage, even for people for whom a relationship has already " commenced."

The theory is that marriage has a " civilizing" effect on men. The presence of children also seems to bring about a desistance in crime and to test whether it is just marriage that causes the change or the presence of children, Warr splits the married section into those with children and those without and finds that it is marriage that affects desistance the most, which agrees with his hypothesis that diminished relations with peers is the real cause of desistance because it does not matter if you have children or not, your relationship with peers will be hurt equally either way. Ultimately, Warr does

find very strong links between time spent with peers, especially delinquent peers and desistance to crime. This supports the theory proposed by Sampson and Laub as marriage and diminished time spent with peers are strongly related. Instead of Sampson and Laub's theory that it is the respect for the institution of marriage, Warr's theory seems more plausible from the very start and the statistical analysis confirms it. It is a refinement of the earlier paper and the results could really help in shaping public policy in efforts to reduce crimes. Since Warr seems to go past the idea of marriage reducing desire for crime to point out the reason why, this reason (association with delinquent friends) can now be attacked and policies can be shaped that would encourage diminished relationships between offenders. It would be interesting to see more in depth studies on the subject such as studies into whether marriage between two delinquents reduces their propensity for crime or decreases it, whether the introduction of children into families where everyone has exhibited criminal behavior changes their desistance for it, etc. There are many avenues to explore to form a more complete picture of the causes of crime and the desistance from crime but this is a valuable insight and a good start for other researchers.

## **Works Cited**

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