

The benefits of marriage

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Marriage can potentially help reduce crime by enabling people to develop greater self-control, according to a new study examining changes in marital status, self-control and marijuana use between late adolescence and early adulthood.

The study by Dr. Walter Forrest, Senior Lecturer in [Criminology](#) at Monash University and Associate Professor Carter Hay, from Florida State University found that young marijuana users who went on to marry were less likely to have continued using the drug than those who remained single.

The research also uncovered a key reason for the change was that those who married also experienced significant improvements in self-control.

“Self-control is one of the strongest predictors of differences between people in terms of their involvement in crime,” said Dr. Forrest.

“People who avoid taking risks, can easily defer gratification, and have little trouble controlling their impulses are much less likely to commit a variety of offenses.

“That said, very little is known about how changes in self-control relate to changes in people’s involvement in crime over time.”

This latest study indicates that the link is due in part to the effects of marriage on self-control.

“Our study shows that improvements in a person’s level of self-control are related to changes in their involvement in crime over time. It also shows that marriage is a significant source of those improvements,” said Dr. Forrest.

The study was based on analyses of the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally-representative survey of American [adolescents](#) and young adults.

Many criminologists have assumed that marriage helps reduce crime because married people feel they have more to lose by committing crime or because married people tend to think about how their spouses might react when deciding how to act in different situations.

Those who are married also spend less time in situations that might lead to crime or in the company of friends who might encourage them to commit crime.

“Most people seem to develop greater self-control as they get older, but [married people](#) seem to experience the greatest increases, independently

of the age at which they married,” said Dr. Forrest.

“Those increases in self-control, in part, explain why people are less likely to be involved in crime when they are married than when they are single.”

Dr. Forrest said that [marriage](#) helps contribute to the development of self-control because it provides new standards of behaviour as well as a reason to maintain those standards.

“And, as any married man or women knows, couples are rarely shy about telling one another when they’ve failed to live up to those standards. We think that helps provide people with practice regulating their behaviour,” said Dr. Forrest.

The article titled Life-Course Transitions, Self-Control, and Desistance from [crime](#) is due to be published in the international journal *Criminology and Criminal Justice* early next year. The full report is available [online](#).

Provided by Monash University

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