

Mothers' lack of legal knowledge linked to juvenile re-offending

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Credit: Michigan State University

Youth who commit crimes for the first time are more likely to re-offend if their mothers don't participate in their legal process. Unfortunately, mothers are widely unfamiliar with the juvenile justice system - and those who know the least about the system also participate the least.

Those are the findings of a first-of-its-kind study led by a Michigan State University criminologist that suggests a dire need for more legal education for parents of juvenile offenders. Caitlin Cavanagh likens it to parents supporting their children in school - that's only really possible if they know what their kids are studying, their homework and exam schedules, and so on.

"Just as there are ways for parents to help in academic contexts, there are ways for parents to help in the legal contexts, insomuch that they know what to do," said Cavanagh, assistant professor in MSU's School of Criminal Justice. "Our results point to some pretty clear implications, which is that we need to educate parents about the [juvenile justice](#) system - about their rights, roles and responsibilities."

The study, published online in the journal *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, is titled "What they don't know CAN hurt them: Mothers' legal knowledge and [youth](#) re-offending."

Cavanagh and Elizabeth Cauffman from the University of California, Irvine, studied the cases of 324 boys aged 13 to 17 who were charged for the first time with low to moderately serious offenses such as vandalism, theft and assault. The study followed up with the youth a year later to see if they had re-offended.

Mothers of the youthful offenders completed questionnaires about their knowledge of and participation in the juvenile justice system. The researchers elected to sample only female guardians because [mothers](#) of [juvenile offenders](#) are more likely than fathers to be present in their children's lives; indeed, nearly 85 percent of youth in the study listed a female as their primary guardian.

According to the study:

- On average, mothers who took the 44-item questionnaire about the juvenile justice system answered only 66 percent of the questions correctly.
- Mothers who were less knowledgeable about the system were significantly less likely to participate.
- Boys were significantly more likely to commit another crime if their mothers didn't participate in their legal proceedings.

"When you think about a 14-year-old boy who is arrested and charged, he can't drive himself to the many hearings and court dates he needs to attend. He's also not old enough to have a legal job, so he can't afford the fees and fines he may have to pay," Cavanagh said. "So these youth are literally dependent on their parents, not just for emotional support or guidance, which is important, but simply to complete the requirements of their probation."

The main goal of the juvenile [justice system](#), the study notes, is rehabilitation - to keep youth from re-offending and ultimately ending up in the [criminal justice](#) system as adults.

"Juvenile offenders are at a critical point in their life where they need to finish their education and start thinking about careers. I would say that adolescence, even more so than adulthood, is a really important time to keep youth away from crime," Cavanagh said. "If parental involvement can help them stay on the right path, that can have lasting repercussions down the road."

Provided by Michigan State University

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