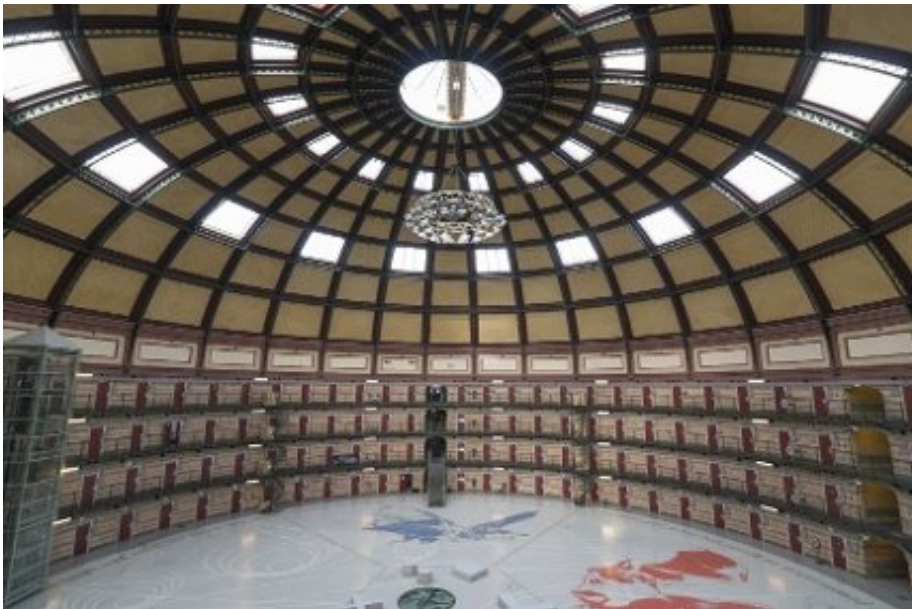


# Researchers study intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior

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Interior of the former prison in Arnhem. Credit: Shutterstock / stockvideoshooter

In general, children of criminal parents are more than twice as likely to exhibit criminal behaviour themselves. The journal *Aggression and Violent Behavior* published the results of a study led by Sytske Besemer about the intergenerational transfer of criminal behaviour. Besemer subjected 23 samples in 25 publications to a systematic review and these included data from 3,423,483 children. She performed research at the University of California at Berkeley with Rubicon funding and is now a

criminological researcher at Uber in San Francisco.

In the article, "A [systematic review](#) and meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior," the researchers also noted that the transfer of [criminal behaviour](#) from generation to generation is high in the United States compared to Denmark and Sweden. In the United States the government adopts harsher punishments.

The research revealed that [children](#) of criminal [parents](#) had a 2.4 times higher chance of falling into crime than children without criminal parents. After the figures had been screened for other factors – such as socioeconomic status, family size, teenage parenthood, conflict with parents, level of education enjoyed, and child abuse – the chance that children with criminal parents break the law was still 1.8 times higher.

This transfer was the strongest from mothers to daughters, followed by mothers to sons, fathers to daughters and then fathers to sons. A possible explanation for this is the traditional role of the mother in child raising or the absence of the father, for example in a [single parent family](#) or where the father is in prison. Also it is less usual for women to exhibit criminal [behaviour](#) and that makes the problem of these mothers more extreme and consequently the transfer of the behaviour stronger. But the researchers do not provide any answers to this.

However, it was clear that the transfer of criminal behaviour was stronger for cohorts born after 1981. This is an important fact according to the researchers. After all, delinquents in the United States and Europe have been more harshly punished since the 1980s: more people are sent to prison and they receive longer prison sentences. In the 1960s and 1970s there was more of an emphasis on the integration and rehabilitation of delinquents.

## **Humane prison system**

Besemer: "In the Netherlands, for example, a tolerant and social prison policy developed after the Second World War with a humane prison system and humane punishments. Until the end of the 1980s, the number of prisoners per head of population was the lowest in Western Europe. There was a turning point after that, and the Netherlands became stricter for several decades. In recent years, however, the number of prisoners in the Netherlands has decreased again."

## **No conclusive evidence**

There is no conclusive evidence for a causal relationship between criminal parents and criminal behaviour in their children. Sytske Besemer: "But these children are subjected to a strong combination of risk factors for criminality. They find themselves in the situation where [antisocial behaviour](#) is easy to learn, in environments with 'risk factors for criminality,'" and they also bear the brunt of the government's prejudices towards them. There might well be an inheritable antisocial tendency as well. All of these factors reinforce each other."

Governments should switch from a short-term focus on trying to control crime to a genuine prevention of criminality to disrupt the crime cycle, argues Besemer. "Interventions aimed at the children of sentenced parents could be a fruitful starting point. Examples are intervention programmes that involve the entire family, such as education and training courses for parents."

Sytske Besemer (1982) worked until 2014 with Rubicon funding on her research "Intergenerational continuity of criminal behaviour, family dynamics, and the criminal justice system" at the University of California at Berkeley. The meta-analysis published on 27 October 2017 is the most important result that emerged from the Rubicon-funded

research.

**More information:** Sytske Besemer et al. A systematic review and meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2017.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.10.004)

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