

Final results of the Criminality, Victimization and Social Interactions (CIVICS) project

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The CIVICS project had three overall objectives.

1. Use recent advances in network modelling to describe the structure and density of various criminal networks and study network dynamics after the arrest/incarceration or death of a central player in the network.
2. Obtain a more accurate measure of the societal costs of crime, including actual measures of lost earnings, physical and mental health problems for victims and their offenders, both before and after a crime takes place.
3. Conduct a randomised control trial within the prison system to better understand how current rehabilitation programmes affect criminal and victim networks.

The project funding ended in 2023. We have made significant progress on all three objectives. In this article, I will summarise the main findings of our projects.

Criminal networks

We have had two separate papers that advance our understanding of criminal networks. The first paper, 'Criminal networks' (Bhuller et al., no date), shows that after the incarceration of a central player in a network, the network members reduce their criminal activity. The effect is driven by the closest network members in terms of geography and centrality measures. We use different models for networks and

show that results are robust to these different models. This paper illustrates that the benefits of rehabilitation in prisons extend beyond the focal prisoner and have implications for designing cost-benefit analyses of different prison systems. We are currently still working on this paper.

The second paper, 'Peer Effects in Prison' (Johnsen and Khoury, 2023), studies peer effects within prisons. They look more specifically at the question of how to reduce recidivism and criminal network

formation by changing the composition of inmates. This is directly policy-relevant as policymakers can decide how to design their prisons. They show several novel findings not previously documented in the literature. For example, they show that exposure to more experienced co-inmates increases recidivism after prison. The network formation itself drives this, as the increased recidivism is driven by co-criminality. Finally, they show that exposure to key players, defined by having large pre-prison networks, in prisons also increases recidivism.

Costs of victimisation

We have been making large advances, providing the first comprehensive mapping of the total costs of victimisations. For this subpart, we have three different papers.

In the paper 'Surviving a Mass Shooting' (Bharadwaj, Løken and Wentzel, 2021), we show that the survivors of a mass shooting in Norway suffer long-term consequences on both health, educational and labour market outcomes. Their closest family members are also negatively affected. However, we do not observe negative effects for school peers. While the event affected the entire country, we show that survivors and their families bear significant additional costs despite robust social safety nets and universal access to healthcare.

In the paper 'Domestic Violence Reports and the Mental Health and Well-being of Victims and Their Children' (Bhuller et al., forthcoming), we show that both victims and their children experience negative consequences on a range of measures of their well-being following a domestic violence (DV) report. Victims seem to generally suffer after a DV report (fewer financial resources, higher unemployment and increased disability use). The pattern for child outcomes similarly indicates a harmful impact (increased crime, lower test scores and lower high school completion).

Again, we find the costs of victimisation to be substantial even in a country with robust social safety nets and universal access to healthcare. In many other countries, with lower levels of benefits through the welfare systems, the costs are likely even higher. The costs of victimisation episodes are so large that policymakers should invest more in crime prevention and support to victims to lower these costs.

In the paper 'Formal Child Care and Later-in-Life Delinquency' (Wentzel, 2023), she looks at the costs of crime from a different angle, measuring the importance of investing in formal child care for future crime prevention. Across three different childcare reforms, affecting different age groups and different children but holding the institutional setting fixed, she finds that formal childcare reduces crime. The effect is driven by men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.



What works in prison?

Although we were not able to complete the planned RCT due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have advanced our understanding of how healthcare is an important part of the rehabilitation component for prisoners.

In the paper 'Mental Health Consequences of Correctional Sentencing' (Bhuller, Khoury and Løken, forthcoming), we show that rehabilitation-oriented sentencing can improve defendants' mental health conditions. We find that these effects are persistent and unlikely driven by shifts in healthcare demand. We interpret these findings in light of the rehabilitative focus of the Norwegian correctional system.

Mental health is a serious public health concern. It is particularly a problem for individuals facing prosecution, with the majority of inmates across countries and systems facing a mental health problem. Our work is a proof of concept that rehabilitation with an emphasis on mental health in the correctional system can have important long-term benefits for offenders.

References

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In an ideal world, investments should be targeted at preventing crime in the first place. However, given that this is not feasible, it is possible to also invest in preventing future crimes and healthcare costs by extensive rehabilitation efforts through the correctional system.

We show that the benefits of fewer crimes and lower health costs outweigh the costs of correctional rehabilitation programmes. Many countries do not invest in rehabilitation, and we show that it is likely that welfare will improve by investing more in rehabilitation through correctional services.

Conclusion

Through this grant, we have established a broader perspective of crime that considers the social context in which it occurs. The findings inform policymakers on how to allocate funds more effectively for crime prevention, supporting victims and rehabilitating incarcerated criminals.

PROJECT NAME CIVICS

PROJECT SUMMARY

Overlooking victims of crime and their relationships to criminals has led to an incomplete and distorted view of crime and its individual and social costs. While a better understanding of these social interactions is crucial for designing more effective anti-crime policy, existing research in criminology, sociology and economics has struggled to identify causal effects due to data limitations and difficult statistical identification issues. This project will push the research frontier by combining register datasets that have never been merged before, and by using several state-of-the-art statistical methods to estimate causal effects related to criminal peer groups and their victims.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Katrine V. Løken is Professor of Economics at the Norwegian School of Economics. Her main work centres on early investments in children and the effects of different social policies. She has also studied the causal effects of incarceration. This ERC grant gives her the means to push the research frontier in the economics of crime with unique access to datasets on victims.

CONTACT DETAILS

View the [Criminality, Victimization and Social Interactions](#) project webpage for details on the team and how to contact us.



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