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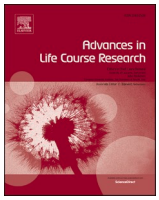

Parenthood, gender, and turning points to crime for young people in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

In very different societal contexts, parenthood has been identified as a critical turning point in life course trajectories. In this qualitative study, we explore parenthood as a turning point for 40 young women and 40 young men in prisons across Latin America. We study the impact of parenthood on criminal trajectories, identify gender differences, and analyze the different mechanisms at work. The analysis distinguishes between positive (crime reducing) and negative (crime increasing) changes following parenthood. When participants felt that they had to change, "slow down" or obtain a more stable and risk-free income, their criminal activities often declined. For women, parenthood could also stabilize healthy intimate relationships, which appeared beneficial for avoiding crime and other harmful practices. On the other hand, frustration arising from failing as parents and increased tensions in daily life often increased criminal involvement. The need for more money, and the absence of legal options for making an income had the same effect. Importantly, negative changes following parenthood were gendered. Men sometimes described frustration at feeling obliged to spend more time at home. For women, parenthood could cement an abusive relationship, cause problems because they became single mothers or make them lose social support. The study is based on repeated qualitative interviews and emphasizes perceived effects of parenthood. The research reveals the variety and nuances of the role of parenthood in criminal trajectories in Latin America and highlights the importance of socio-economic circumstances for criminal trajectories. We argue that in contexts of structural poverty and unemployment, where illegal economies often dominate over legal ones (as seen in many Global South settings), parenthood may lead to increased criminal involvement rather than desistance.

1. Introduction

Nadia was 29 years old when we met her. She had been in prison for two years in Argentina, convicted of drug-dealing. During our conversations, she spoke of key moments that shaped her criminal trajectory: her father's premature death, starting to use cocaine, and finally imprisonment. The birth of her child when she was 19 was a turning point. While parenthood is often associated with women's desistance from crime (Droppelmann, 2022; Kreager et al., 2010), this was not the case for Nadia. She had responsibility for providing for a child, felt trapped in an abusive relationship, and suffered several years of economic violence. Motherhood lessened the chances of a better life and accelerated her criminal career. Nadia's life history illustrates what we often found in our study of people in Latin American prisons: parenthood was not always a turning point conducing to desistance and had significantly different implications for men and women. Additionally, her intertwined experiences of motherhood and criminal activity highlight a broader regional trend: growing involvement of women in crime (usually drug trafficking) is often driven by their roles as single mothers struggling to provide for their families (Buxton et al., 2017; Lenox, 2011; Simmons, 2017).

Most studies in life course criminology have been conducted in the USA, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. We argue that the specific realities of Latin America—i.e., crime rates (Bergman & Fondevila, 2021), the connection between trajectories and economic marginalization (Kessler, 2010; Orlando & Farrington 2023; Viscardi, 2006), oscillation between crime and conformity (Droppelmann, 2022), living arrangements (Araos & Siles, 2021) and gender norms (Pérez, 2021)—require particular attention to societal and historical circumstances (Elder, 1994). Additionally, most studies have relied on quantitative

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data, often overlooking the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory experiences associated with parenthood (Schinkel, 2019). Arguably, qualitative approaches might be helpful when life course analysis explores new societal contexts, nuances, and perceptions of turning points.

This research seeks to contribute to the literature by (a) doing large-scale qualitative life course analysis in Latin America, a region where this has not been done previously; (b) examining parenthood as a turning point in criminal trajectories in the lives of young incarcerated people across six Latin American countries; (c) explore gender differences in the role of parenthood in shaping these trajectories by analyzing the mechanisms at work. For want of a better description, we call the changes we observe for positive and negative change. The study is qualitative, does not speak to causality or prevalence, and the analysis is based on perception of the effects of parenthood. Still, we suggest that in contexts marked by scarcity and structural inequality, parenthood frequently acts as a mechanism that reinforces criminal careers rather than disrupts them. This can challenge the often-implicit assumption in life course criminology that parenthood is inherently a hook for positive change.

2. Parenthood as a turning point in criminal trajectories

Life course criminology is concerned with differences in offending *within* individuals over time (Skardhamar, 2010, p. 1). The approach brings together insights from numerous disciplines to explain why criminal behavior happens and why it changes over time, generally peaking in late adolescence (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2010). A distinction is usually made between studies of risk factors, the onset of crime, persistence in it and desistance from it (Carlsson & Sarnecki 2016). Scholars have explored the criminal careers of offenders in the light of concepts such as developmental trajectories, transitions, and turning points (Kazemian et al., 2019). Trajectories are interdependent sequences of events in different life domains, such as drug use, criminal justice involvement, and employment (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Teruya & Hser, 2010). Transitions are short-term changes in stages or roles, some but not all of which lead to turning points producing long-term behavioral change (Teruya & Hser, 2010). Examples of turning points are family formation, stable employment, the disintegration of peer groups, and subjective shifts in identity that are important for changes in offending (Carlsson, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Life course criminology emphasizes transitions and turning points such as marriage (King et al., 2007), children (Abell, 2018), employment (Uggen, 2000), and military service (Sampson & Laub, 1996) that can modify a criminal trajectory. The emphasis is often on turning points that serve as a path to desistance (Bersani & Doherty, 2018) rather than just on changes in the frequency and severity of crimes. According to Stone and Rydberg (2019), turnings points may be associated with biological or cognitive changes, or with social roles, bonds or identity. Parenthood includes several of these: as physical changes for the mother, new ways of perceiving the world, and a new role in society. Transition to parenthood might therefore be a more significant turning point in a mother's life course than transition to marriage (Kreager et al., 2010, p. 223). The significance of these transitions lies not only in the change itself but also in the attachments formed through new relationships (Abell, 2018), the introduction of new forms of social control (Laub & Sampson 2003), and the reorganization of everyday life, as emphasized by routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979). We focus on having children in this study, since participants (without being asked about it directly) described parenthood in life-history interviews as an important life event that influenced their criminal trajectories.

For women, changes following pregnancy and parenthood often occur more rapidly than for men. Social expectations frequently pressure women to prioritize their pregnancy over their own needs. This is evident in both longitudinal quantitative studies examining the intersection of motherhood, crime, and harmful drug use (e.g., Kreager et al., 2010) and qualitative studies that unpack these experiences (e.g., Aiello & McQueeney, 2019). Immediate effect on drug consumption is not necessarily found in men (Staff et al., 2010). Women also appear more likely than men to alter their routine activities and the places they frequent after becoming parents, opting for private, less 'risky' family spaces over public ones. This shift is highlighted in mixed-method studies, such as Hunt et al. (2005), focusing on changes in experiences. This encourages their withdrawal from crime.

Within qualitative scholarship in Latin America, motherhood in prison has garnered significant attention, yet mainly linked to imprisonment experiences (Martínez-Álvarez & Sindeev, 2021; Tabbush & Gentile, 2013). However, few studies have investigated motherhood as a potential pathway to desistance from crime among young people. For instance, using a mixed-method approach, Vigna (2011) explored the positive effects of motherhood on women's criminal trajectories in Uruguay, drawing on judicial records of previously convicted women. She found that motherhood provides life with purpose and meaning, offering self-respect and a new sense of dignity. Similarly, qualitative studies such as Masone et al. (2017, p. 66) suggest that motherhood encourages young women in Chile to reflect on their behavior and view themselves as having agency and control over their lives. In Chile, Mettifogo et al. (2015) also found that motherhood and its associated narratives prompted young convicted women involved in crime to alter their social circles, actively distancing themselves from criminal associates. Despite the methodological diversity, these studies report that women who became mothers often felt compelled to find a partner who was not involved in crime.

Droppelmann (2022) conducted the most extensive study on the desistance trajectories of young people in Latin America. This mixed-method study of individuals serving community sentences in Chile shows that motherhood plays a central role in desistance in three major ways: First, caring for a baby fosters a new sense of belonging, emotional stability, and future orientation. Second, it offers an opportunity to fulfill the social imperative of being a 'good mother,' which brings recognition, social integration, and contributes to family reunification and healing past conflicts. Finally, motherhood allows women to 'redeem themselves,' shifting from a life viewed as selfish and irresponsible to one centered on maternal duties, where the child's needs take precedence over their own.

For men, desistance from crime is generally more closely linked to preparation for future commitments, as highlighted in the literature (Sapouna et al., 2011). Northern life course criminology has identified fatherhood as a theoretically significant 'hook for change'—an opportunity to abandon criminal careers (Giordano et al., 2011) or, at the very least, reduce criminal behavior (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Sampson & Laub, 2009). Longitudinal studies focusing on men emphasize that active involvement in parenting increases desistance from crime, as evidenced by large population-based representative studies (Landers et al., 2015). It also reduces involvement in gangs, as shown in longitudinal studies with convicted young offenders (Pyrooz et al., 2013; 2017; see also Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). Parenthood thus acts as a turning point, deterring criminal behavior by fostering a new worldview (Foster, 2004) and new 'responsibilities' (Haigh, 2009). Vaughan (2007), for example, points to important changes in their internal narrative when young people become parents, with men, for example, wanting to be "a good father" and "a role models" for their children (Carlsson, 2013).

Both quantitative and qualitative research from the USA shows that the positive effect of parenthood is influenced by whether the pregnancy is planned and desired (e.g., Giordano et al., 2011; Moloney et al., 2009). When it was unwanted, criminal activities were maintained or sometimes even increased (Kreager et al., 2010). Parenthood, thus, can also have negative consequences caused by the stress of new social expectations and by new demands on time, energy, and economic resources. The emotional turmoil associated with parenthood can sometimes represent an extra problem, rather than a path out of crime (Monsbakken et al., 2013). Economic constraints and new financial obligations can bind men to money-making criminal activities (Edin

et al., 2004; Moloney et al., 2009). With some variations, the same applies to women, if they already have a record, are serving a sentence, or are on probation. In such cases, motherhood can end up being an extra burden on top of other personal challenges such as addiction (Michalsen, 2011), job hunting, and parole requirements (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Young parents seem to be particularly prone to the negative consequences of parenthood, partly because paternity propels them into adulthood prematurely. The social pressure of that transition can result in the start of criminal activity or drug use (Na, 2016).

In sum, while research on parenthood and desistance from crime remains largely underexplored in the Global South, research from other regions suggest that parenthood generally has a positive effect on desistance. This is largely because individuals adapt to new social roles and responsibilities that are less compatible with criminal behavior. Quantitative studies consistently show that motherhood is associated with reduced or ceased offending (e.g., Kreager et al., 2010; Hunt et al., 2005). However, the impact of parenthood is not only gendered and difficult to reduce to a simple good-bad dichotomy but is also highly influenced by offense type and context (Abell, 2018). Qualitative scholarship highlights that parenthood often prompts an identity shift, fostering pro-social behaviors, with motherhood playing a key role in women's desistance narratives (e.g., Moloney et al., 2009; Vigna, 2011). Nonetheless, qualitative studies also point out that the obligations of motherhood and structural conditions may jeopardize desistance (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Michalsen 2013).

Research in Latin America remains scarce, and there is a lack of empirically grounded descriptions of the mechanisms that are involved when parenthood influences criminal life course trajectories. The limited life course research from the region largely supports the general impression conveyed by literature from the Global North—that parenthood is a positive turning point for individuals with criminal trajectories. However, as Viscardi (2006) argues, these paths toward desistance are shaped by socio-economic conditions, as vulnerability often correlates with the absence of long-term educational and employment opportunities, thereby limiting pathways out of crime.

Our study builds on prior research (e.g., Abell, 2018; Schinkel, 2019), but expand the scope to explore whether these patterns hold consistently across Latin America and are shaped differently by women and men. The focus is not only on identifying these experiences but also on understanding the underlying mechanisms that shapes how parenthood is perceived and labeled by individuals. While we acknowledge the many positive impacts that parenthood can have on criminal trajectories, our aim is to also include and discuss potential negative effects. Given the qualitative nature of our research, we seek to explore the subjective experiences and nuances of these diverse outcomes, situating them within the socio-economic context of Latin America. By doing so, we are guided by Elder's (1994) emphasis on place and historical change and discuss the ways in which parenthood as a turning point is shaped by broader conditions of marginalization and limited access to legal employment.

3. The Latin American context

The economic and demographic characteristics of Latin America are deeply interconnected with its patterns of criminal activity and desistance processes. These factors underscore a backdrop of severe socio-economic inequality, driving both conflict and economic disparity. This persistent inequality permeates all facets of social life and has been further intensified in recent years by escalating violence and crime, disproportionately affecting various social groups (Bergman, 2006). From a life course perspective, these contextual aspects are essential for understanding the influence of events such as parenthood. A key argument, as stated by Torrado (2007), has centered on how economic setting shapes life events and transitions.

The highly stratified societies in Latin America result in unequal access to the labor market, significantly influencing individual life trajectories. Although major economies in the region—such as Argentina ($13,730.5) and Mexico ($13,926.1)—report similar average incomes, deep subnational inequalities persist (Databank, 2024). Despite a slight reduction in the Gini coefficient to 0.43 in 2021, Latin America still holds the highest levels of inequality globally (Databank, 2024). In fact, the wealthiest 10 % of the population earn 21 times more than the poorest 10 %.

Structural barriers to employment have also significantly contributed to persistent criminal trajectories and the existence of an extended informal market (Schargrodsky & Freira, 2021). In 2022, nearly one-third of the region's population lived in poverty, with the rate rising to 42.5 % among children and adolescents (CEPAL, 2023). Poverty is also more prevalent among women, indigenous people, and those in rural areas. Of the 292 million employed individuals in the region, half work in informal jobs, nearly a fifth live in poverty, 40 % earn below the minimum wage, and half lack pension contributions. Labor participation rates are notably lower for women (51.9 %) compared to men (74.5 %), and women face higher unemployment rates (8.6 % vs. 5.8 % for men). A major barrier to women's employment is the burden of care work, with women in households with children participating less (61.6 %) compared to those without children (73.5 %) (CEPAL, 2023) .

Extreme inequality and unemployment significantly impact the demographics of these countries (see Torrado, 2007). Poverty affects social strata differently, reinforcing vulnerable trajectories. Indicators such as average years in the educational system and teenage fertility rates highlight how biographical processes can either alter or solidify life paths. These factors also shape specific types of parenthood and motherhood, influenced by age and school dropout rates. Despite disparities among countries, the region persistently shows high numbers of live births per woman, teenage pregnancies, and high school dropout rates. For instance, Honduras (2.3) and Bolivia (2.6) have the highest fertility rates (CELADE, 2022; Tuñón & Poy, 2020). Additionally, high adolescent maternity and fertility rates correspond to a high percentage of single mothers. In Mexico, 11 % of mothers are single, with around 4, 180,000 women raising children without fathers . This percentage increases to 19 % in Argentina (CIPPEC, 2022), 21 % in Chile (INJUV, 2021), and reaches a staggering 44 % in Honduras, nearly half of all mothers (INE, 2023). Viewed through a gender lens, these structural conditions create a universe of poor single mothers who often drop out of school and may resort to petty crimes for subsistence.

Latin America faces notably higher levels of inequality compared to the major economies of the Global North, along with elevated fertility rates at younger ages and significant structural barriers to stable, formal employment. These challenges are shaped by factors such as gender norms and the limitations of public health infrastructure. In this study we explore the relation between positive and negative change of parenthood on criminal trajectories and study the context specificity of turning points in the lives of incarcerated individuals in this region. Drawing on previous research on life courses and economic contexts, we propose that living in harsher conditions—characterized by less access to stable employment and higher fertility rates at younger ages—could intensify the negative impact of parenthood on their criminal trajectories.

4. Methods

This research is based on a large-scale qualitative project CRIMLA conducted in 2021–2023 with incarcerated populations aged 18–78 in six Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico.[1] Quota sampling was used to get equal numbers of participants convicted of different types of crime: robbery, homicide,

[1] See project website (https://www.crimeinlatinamerica.com/) that describes the project in more detail and includes interview guide and coding book. Brazil was part of the CRIMLA project, but is not included in this study.

drug-dealing, kidnapping/extortion, and sexual assaults. From this larger study we draw a subsample of 40 women and 40 men (N = 80) for the analysis in this paper. Our sample is: a) younger, 18–30 years old at the time of the interview (following the emphasis on young people in this Special Issue); b) has children (following the emphasis on parenthood); c) excludes people charged with sexual offenses (due to the different characteristics of this group). There is an equal number of men and women both in the larger study and in the sample for our study (see Table 1).

Interviews were open-ended and consisted of three individual sessions that lasted an average of one hour and ten minutes, although some lasted up to four hours. Fieldwork was also carried out in the prisons and carceral educational facilities where participants were recruited. Both the first and second author conducted fieldwork and did interviews, but due to the magnitude of the data collection, a team of research assistants conducted most of the interviews.

Table 1
Demographic and crime-related characteristics of participants.

Variables	n (%)
Sex/gender*	
Men	40 (50 %)
Women	40 (50 %)
Age range	
18–20	2 (3 %)
21–23	14 (18 %)
24–26	24 (30 %)
27–30	40 (50 %)
Education level (highest level completed)**	
Below primary school	13 (16 %)
Primary school	38 (48 %)
Secondary school	27 (34 %)
University	2 (3 %)
Marital status	
Single	38 (48 %)
In relationship/Married	35 (44 %)
Missing	7 (9 %)
Number of children	
1	49 (61 %)
2	16 (20 %)
3	4 (5 %)
4	4 (5 %)
5 or more	7 (9 %)
Country of origin	
Argentina	9 (11 %)
Bolivia	17 (21 %)
Chile	12 (15 %)
Colombia	17 (21 %)
Honduras	12 (15 %)
Mexico	13 (16 %)
Crime	
Theft/robbery	27 (34 %)
Drug-dealing	18 (23 %)
Homicide	23 (29 %)
Kidnapping and extortion	12 (15 %)
Prison sentence	
1–2 years	9 (11 %)
3–5 years	17 (21 %)
6–10 years	20 (25 %)
11–20 years	20 (25 %)
21 or more years	14 (18 %)
Significance of children in interviews***	
High	60 (75 %)
Medium	17 (21 %)
Low	3 (4 %)

* In this paper, we use a dichotomous definition of sex/gender. Trans participants were not included in this paper.

** Since the ages associated with education levels in the countries varied, participants were classified according to the name of the level (primary/secondary), regardless of the age differences involved.

*** This variable is based on Schinkel (2019).

4.1. Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. Firstly, interviews were transcribed and later processed in NVivo 12. There they were coded using a codebook including more than 200 codes. Secondly, and in accordance with the research question in this study, some of these codes (parenthood, pregnancies, intimate relationships, turning points, etc.) were chosen for inductive and open thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis primarily examines the consequences following the birth of participants' first child, which typically occurred in their late teens. Additionally, we incorporated relevant excerpts from interviews that discuss experiences with subsequent children when these insights help to further expand or clarify our findings. When presenting participants in the section below, we have highlighted the age when they had their first child, since this was the information most important to understanding their situation. For five participants, we do not know the exact age at which they had their first child, so we give a less precise indication, for example "late-teens". Participants were usually much older when interviewed than when they became parents—on average, by eight years (see Table 1).

4.2. Limitations

The mechanisms we describe were not distinct for any country in the study but found in all national contexts. Since the sample from each country is qualitative and not representative, the analysis cannot compare the experiences of parenthood across countries nor is it suited for highlighting national particularities. Our primary focus is therefore to re-examining mainstream life course theories through an inductive, actor-centered approach in Latin America emphasizing similarities across countries in this region, rather than on establishing differences between countries. We acknowledge that the differences between the countries included in the study are vast and important and suggest that this is studied with a more representative sample in another study.

The study is also retrospective and cross-sectional and results can be affected by memory bias, because of the length of time between the birth of the first child and the interviews. The discourse of parenthood might also change in different life phases (Liles, 2018) and normative views of parenthood might have led to some underreporting of negative changes. However, since we had three interviews with each participant that might have helped increase trust and allowed for more nuanced descriptions of parenthood (Goyes & Sandberg, 2024). Lastly and most importantly, all the participants were in prison when interviewed. Regardless of how parenthood was experienced (and the effect it had on their lives), they were all eventually convicted of crimes. This makes positive changes less represented than would have been the case if the sample had been recruited outside of prison.

4.3. Ethics

The study was reviewed and accepted by the ethical committee of the six countries included in the study: Gino Germani Research Institute (Argentina); Bolivian Criminological Sciences Academy (Bolivia); Antonio Nariño University (Colombia); Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (Mexico); Social Sciences Faculty (Chile); National Autonomous University of Honduras (Honduras). We followed the ethical guidelines of Helsinki Ethical Principles. Prior to interviews, oral and written informed consent forms were given to the participants. We discussed the nature of the interview, and the overall purpose of the project. Participants could withdraw from the study at any point, but few did. Overall, participants said they appreciated the opportunity the interviews gave for venting emotions, presenting their own stories, etc. (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023). Having three repeated interviews also made it easier for participants to understand consent, and withdraw, and easier for researchers to follow up participants (Goyes & Sandberg, 2024). All names of people, locations and institutions were de-identified

in the transcripts. All potentially recognizable details were excluded from the paper. Recordings were stored securely in an online platform provided by the University of Oslo and data storage procedures were approved by Sikt (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research). Participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms in the analysis below.

5. Results

On average, participants had their first child when they were 18 years old. Additionally, by that time, most had already engaged in crime, whether sporadically or frequently. In most cases, having children had a significant impact on their lives, and particularly on their criminal trajectories. Parenthood had two main implications for them: it was either experienced as a turning point propelling them to desist from crime or, conversely, it triggered the initiation, continuation or expansion of a criminal trajectory. A minority of participants did not regard parenthood as a turning point and did not see it as a significant life event influencing their criminal trajectories. In the continuing we emphasize the large majority who either described it as a positive or negative change.

5.1. Parenthood as a positive change

For many participants, parenthood was a turning point diverting them from criminal activities. Becoming a parent changed, at least partially, and for a time, how they related to work and their families. For the participants who described parenthood as an event turning them away from crime, this was connected to feeling a need for change, or "slowing down"; some women said having children strengthened their intimate relationships. Parenthood also meant they had new economic responsibilities that motivated them to get legal, risk-free jobs.

5.1.1. A need to change and "slow down"

Some participants described parenthood as a turning point that altered their previous criminal trajectory, mainly by settling them into a different daily rhythm, changing their peer groups, and leading them to get involved with new institutions. Women tended to emphasize that their pregnancies initiated a maternal feeling that made them more responsible and sensitive. Carolina said:

> When she (daughter) was born I thought, 'Well, I need to change. I am responsible for a little life now. I have to be their mother, their mom. (…). Love them and take care of them. (…). So, I think this is quite natural, that we (women) change, sort things out (Chile, first child at 16).

Men often described the transition as the desire to become more morally-sound "role models" and the need to provide a supportive home. Hector talked about the need for change:

> You can't just be doing all the same stuff as before. I had to get some things straight and be more responsible (…). Take the time you go to bed, or things like that. Babies need to have a routine, so they know what to do. They imitate you, (Colombia, first child at 17).

Parenthood was also described as a turning point away from crime because it led to reduced drug use. María said, "And yes, I got the positive result (pregnancy test). Then I found out that I was four months pregnant. And then I packed in the drugs and got rehabilitated," (Colombia, first child at 17). Taking drugs during pregnancy, and thereafter, did not conform to her ideals of parenthood.

Sometimes parenthood was framed as an opportunity to improve their lives through a connection with institutions. Carlos described the changes associated with parenthood, which started with the prenatal care checkups.

> So, things changed. A bit to start with, then more and more. But that's what happens with these things (…). When I took her to the hospital to have the ultrasound done, it all started, because I needed to get all the paperwork, get an appointment, and all that bureaucratic shit. (…). I started to become an organized person, (Argentina, first child in late teens).

Becoming parents meant being connected with local healthcare facilities, governance agencies and, later, schools, which would otherwise have been inaccessible to them. Jorge (Argentina, 20) explained that it was difficult to get in contact with state agencies: "So, having him [baby] was a gateway to all these places that were closed to me before." Contacts with formal and informal institutions helped them integrate into mainstream society.

Some participants who described parenthood as a positive turning point referred to changes following parenthood more as "slowing down" than a fundamental break. For them, having children signified a temporary shift in lifestyle and work-related activities, but did not necessarily imply a permanent alteration in their criminal trajectories. Mario said:

> I had to slow down, take things differently. I knew I was not going to do a good job as a father if I stayed out all week, didn't sleep, arrived home drunk. (…). I was a good citizen then! Didn't steal a dime! Worked as a builder for almost two years (Honduras, first child in mid-teens).

For him parenthood was a turning point, but one that only lasted for a limited time. The same was true for Romina, who explained it by referring to her own family and upbringing:

> I knew it was just for a time, because then usually lives go back to normal. It was like this for my dad, and my brother. Life sucks you right back in (…). For me, it was the first year, but then the same old story, (giggles) (Mexico, first child at 17).

Although parenthood was a temporary halt in their criminal trajectories, it was seen as an important event. Hernán, for instance, said:

> I know for a fact that after I had my kids, some things changed. I had never looked for a regular job before or had healthcare. (…). Then those things started to matter to me, and I am more, you know, responsible (Bolivia, first child at 20).

Those who saw parenthood as a time to "slow down" rather than a definitive turning point had perhaps looked back on life and realized that things did not always turn out as planned. Since they were all in prison, this was to some extent the case for all participants. Nonetheless, parenthood was experienced as an important turning point away from crime, whether long-lasting or not.

The difference between those experiencing parenthood as a definite turning point and those seeing it as slowing down is not clear-cut and shows the many nuances in life courses and how they are experienced (Schinkel, 2019). Even though they were young when they became parents, having children led many participants to change their lives significantly. Moreover, as Schmidt et al. (2017) argue, this change goes beyond what people do and includes how they feel. While having a child does not always trigger an immediate and concrete change of life, it can still be associated with important changes in subjective identities and attitudes.

5.1.2. Stabilizing intimate relationships

There are important gender differences in how parenthood impacts desistance (Giordano et al., 2011). More women than men, for instance, said parenthood had stabilized and improved previously unstable relationships. Lucía said that, after having her first child:

> I moved in with him because of how he treated my daughter. She called him 'dad', she loved him. Every time he came home, she would

> go crazy with joy, and I liked that, I liked seeing my daughter happy. For the first time I felt good, (Argentina, first child at 16).

Settled intimate relationships had positive effects, such as the feeling of "normalcy" arising from being part of a functioning nuclear family and having a partner who contributed economically to the household. They could also reduce harmful drug use and other destructive behavior. This was the case for Ana:

> Since I moved in with him, I have relaxed. Things started to be calmer, quieter. Completely! I stopped drinking, I stopped using drugs, I stopped… (…) I got pregnant, moved in, stopped using (Mexico, first child at 17).

Women found that stabilizing relationships helped them transition to a better way of life. This did not necessarily mean the absence of conflict or illegal activities, but they saw it as an improvement. Carla for instance, talked about the advantages of being one of a couple when she became a mother:

> We could make ends meet easier, as a couple living together. You might think having a child is expensive, there are loads of costs, but for me it was super positive (…). Like a team, I mean (Honduras, first child at 17).

Parenthood has significant implications for intimate relationships, with its impact largely depending on the characteristics of the partner. For instance, having a partner who is not involved in crime seems to play a crucial role in viewing parenthood as a positive life change (see Vigna, 2011; Masone et al., 2017; Mettifogo et al., 2015). Although social settings varied—ranging from unstable local economies, extreme poverty, and a lot of street crime to more stable job markets and lower crime rates—most participants described parenthood's impact as unrelated to their context. This suggests that the quality of the bond formed may hold greater importance than the surrounding social circumstances.

5.1.3. Need for a stable risk-free income

Parenthood brought with it both strong social and personal expectations that a criminal pathway should be abandoned, as well as a more urgent need for stable income. Having a child became an incentive to seek out legitimate jobs that avoided the risks and complications associated with illegal activities. This shift was predominantly expressed when the possibility of such economic and labor opportunities was seen as attainable. Lucas, for instance, described how he changed after becoming a father:

> You just can't support a family by doing small stuff. So, at some point, I had to go and look for a legal job (…). I could have continued with the small activities (burglaries), but it would never be as stable (Chile, first child at 19).

Participants often switched from criminal activities to ones they considered more legitimate and less risky, whether these were jobs in the legal economy or not. As Calver (2016): 10) points out, being socially included often depends on having paid employment. Clara said:

> A child comes, and you need to change. To have a more stable home, a quieter life. At least while they are young. (…). Having a regular job helps with that. Everything is steadier. Then all other aspects of life are more normal (Chile, first child at 21).

Before having children, Carolina had several short-term registered jobs. Participants who mentioned finding a job as a turning point usually had previous experience of the formal labor market or a supportive social network.

The periods when participants had stable or legal jobs, were not necessarily crime-free. Some still made money from minor crime like small-scale drug dealing and petty theft. They nevertheless stressed that these sidelines had little impact on their children or on their role as parents, and that the new legal job was the most important one. The many complexities and nuances of turning points in life course trajectories (Schinkel, 2019), are shown by the way parenthood was a positive turning point in their criminal life courses, even when it did not lead to complete desistance from crime.

5.2. Parenthood as a negative change

While the participants above highlighted the significant impact parenthood had on their desistance processes, others said that having children led to their involvement in crime. Unlike when parenthood was seen as a turning point towards desistance, there was a significant difference between women and men when parenthood was seen as increasing criminal involvement.

5.2.1. Frustration at failing as parents

Most participants experienced social and individual expectations they should change or "slow down" on becoming parents. Many acknowledged the difficulty of adapting to a new lifestyle, and some described how failing to change their lifestyle had the opposite effect. Samuel said:

> I got her pregnant, because I had the idea that I was going to change, that I was going to have a baby boy and that I was going to give up pot, but it was very hard, it was very hard to stop using (…). I thought, 'When my boy is born, I will have a different attitude' (…).' So, I started raising him with the promise that I would not use drugs. (…) But then I relapsed, and everything went downhill (Mexico, first child at 19).

When Mariana tried to adjust to a different lifestyle, or "get into the new rhythm" as she described it, she felt disoriented and out of place. Realizing how hard it was when she had her first daughter worsened her situation:

> I tried, I swear I did. But it's just not for me, that lifestyle. And I am not defending it, saying, 'this is a cool. I don't know how to wake up early, take the bus, take the train, go to clean some random house of a lady, and go back home. Repeat. Some people might be able to change, but it wasn't for me. Made me feel like a sucker (Chile, first child in late teens).

The struggle to succeed as new parents often led to stronger justifications for criminal activities, particularly when participants described a lack of job opportunities and social support to facilitate a change in their environments. Ana, for example, said: "I had to do things to adapt. I had (criminal) jobs, I liked them, it was easy money. (…). But it was so hard for me. I struggled," (Honduras, first child at 18). Sometimes failed parenthood led to further loss, which made matters worse. María said: "When I was 18, I had a daughter. They gave custody to my mom, because I was a drug addict, I lost her. (…). That made me end up worse," (Argentina, first child at 18). Not being able to stop using cocaine meant she lost custody of her child, which further increased her drug use.

Parenthood caused tension between expectations of change and failure to achieve it, which could cause emotional turmoil and frustration (Herrera-Pastor & Frost 2021). If anticipated changes do not happen, parenthood may become a negative turning point in criminal life courses. Due to socio-economic and societal circumstances, the preconditions for securing a stable and safe home for children might be more difficult to achieve in Latin American than elsewhere. Frustration at feeling one is a bad parent might therefore be more common.

5.2.2. Increased tension and rejection by one's family

For some participants, parenthood meant increased burdens and difficulties, such as having to move back in with parents, stay with partners they otherwise would have avoided, borrow money, and argue about childcare. These difficulties caused stress and frustration that increased destructive behaviors in the same ways as did frustrations that

arose from feeling like failed parents.

Ana, for instance, had increasing problems after having her child at 24 and subsequently leaving a partner: "So I had to move back with my family. That was really tough for me (…) They were just not supportive, they basically blamed me! And I had to be with them every single day," (Chile, first child at 24). Becoming parents was related to negative change because it was part of a broader situation that included a general frustration of their expectations, lack of resources, and sometimes a clash with their social networks. This is what Ramiro experienced:

> It was a nightmare. I was a still a child, I had no money, and my family was pestering me all day. "She (his partner) is a good-for-nothing!" they would say. So, turning to the people who were supposed to help me was useless (Colombia, first child at 19).

While women who found that motherhood triggered destructive behavior and crime tended to emphasize social isolation, men were more likely to feel a loss of freedom and that they were being forced into a life they did not want. For Germán, fatherhood was a role he did not want, and his new responsibilities increased his criminal activity: "Life took a turn for the worse, because that is not me. I am not that type of guy. (…). So, I started going out more and going back to my old habits (drug-dealing)," (Bolivia, first child at 23). Moisés also scaled up his drug-dealing business when he discovered he was going to be a father at 19. Only a few months after the birth, he moved so he could "really dedicate myself to work," (Honduras, first child at 19). Young fatherhood can be a catalyst for risk factors pertaining to criminal careers, especially for those experiencing multiple disadvantages (Wilkinson et al., 2009; see also Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010).

Sometimes the increased tensions participants experienced had much more dramatic consequences. For Danila, becoming a single mother coincided with being rejected by her parents.

> So we started dating, then we moved in together and then I became pregnant. The problems started there: he used to say that I shouldn't worry if I got pregnant, that he would take care of everything. Turns out it was the opposite. (…). And when he kicked me out, I tried to go to my parents, and that was a disaster. (…). They didn't accept me or my baby (Chile, first child in late teens).

For Luna the situation was even worse. She was kidnapped, raped, and as a result, got pregnant when she was 14. Her family blamed her and denied her any form of help.

> I didn't even know I was pregnant. I was so thin. (…). Everything I ate I would throw up. My sister brought a pregnancy test, I locked myself in the bathroom and it was positive. (…). My mom hit me so hard when I arrived home, after almost a year of being kidnapped (Argentina, first child at 15).

Women generally reported more stress and emotional turmoil following pregnancies, and they experienced more rejection by relatives, friends and acquaintances than men. This can be seen as victim-blaming and the punishment of women who are considered to have gone against societal norms and morals (Haney, 2013; Singh, 2017).

In contrast to participants who saw parenthood as a time of personal change or strengthened relationships, those who spoke of being worse off after having children were often living in more precarious conditions and had weaker social connections. Their difficulties were accompanied by a decrease in social support, and sometimes rejection by their family. In precarious circumstances, parenthood can exacerbate negative life course trajectories (Eichmeyer & Kent, 2023; see also Sampson & Laub 1990), which is crucial to understanding parenthood as a turning point in Latin America.

5.2.3. *Solidifying an abusive relationship*

While some women described parenthood as a way out of crime, for others it meant solidifying abusive relationships. These latter described how having children led to more arguments with their partners and made it harder to leave them if they were abusive. Eva explained that she had to stay with a violent partner after they had a child:

> Neither of us was prepared for such a huge responsibility. The expenses of the home, money running out, and he (ex-husband) was a bit lazy. Unfortunately, us women sometimes repeat what we have learned from our moms. I also realized he was violent and a batterer. (…). He would hit me while I had my baby in my arms. (…). Those years with him, when I had my children, and I couldn't leave, were a living hell, (Mexico, first child at 17).

Parenthood cemented relationships with partners, in a way often seen as unavoidable because of the economic situation, and this created opportunities for increased violence and coercive control. Nadia emphasized the economic component and, at the same time, illustrated a widespread belief among participants that early teenage years was not early for parenthood and cohabitation:

> I was not young when I started being with him. I was 15, and he supported me. I always say that I stayed with him because, in spite of everything, he gave me everything that I needed. Because I didn't have a home, I was moving from one place to another, I was a mess (Argentina, first child at 15).

As demonstrated by feminist scholars, economic violence is a control strategy in intimate relationships that is found worldwide (EIGE, 2023). For the women in our study, becoming a mother while in an abusive relationship was an obstacle to moving away from crime. This was seen in various ways: being forced to continue committing crimes by their partners, following delinquent pathways as part of their relationship, seeing crime as a way to pursue economic independence, or simply being afraid of making any change in the status quo. Deciding to end an abusive relationship is complex and involves changing one's view of the partner, identifying violence as such, realizing its impact on one's children, etc. (Chang, et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2015). Economic and cultural factors (i.e., poverty and patriarchy) also play an important role. Structural economic inequalities, established gender structures and machismo cultures are therefore important to understanding women's experiences.

5.2.4. *Loss of social support – need for an illegal income*

Socio-economic circumstances are crucial to understanding criminal trajectories and parenthood as a turning point. In Latin America, there are few legal jobs for marginalized populations, and when people become parents, the need for money can drive them to commit crimes, thus fueling, rather than halting, criminal trajectories. For many women, motherhood without a partner could be difficult and sometimes meant emotional pain and anxiety, as well as economic problems. Guillermina said that the unexpected departure of her partner meant losing her job:

> We were together for five years, but when I got pregnant, he said "I'll be right back," and he never came back. The worst thing was that I'd worked with him, with the pickup truck, so I lost my job. I was alone with the kids then. I didn't know what to do. I had a one-year-old girl when I got pregnant, she was still wearing diapers, she drank formula milk (…). Everything got worse (Bolivia, first child at 21).

While having children was usually framed positively, and participants expressed a lot of love for them, they still experienced motherhood as an obstacle to better living conditions and to a life without crime. In Victoria's case, her unplanned pregnancy, the former partner's reluctance to provide any form of help and her limited economic and social resources were linked to her resorting to theft.

> I found out I was pregnant, and the guy didn't want to help me with anything at all. He had started treating me so badly. It was so terrible. I had to beg for money to feed my baby (Colombia, first child at 18).

Becoming a single mother could trigger a range of survival strategies and several participants said that they had to resort to crime to provide

for their children (Taylor et al., 2015). Micaela said that it had gotten her involved in the drug market:

> The problem was then that I became really depressed, because my children's father left me when I was pregnant. I was alone with three kids. My money was running out, I had to start selling weed, then I started selling cocaine, because it was the only way to make ends meet (Colombia, first child at 18).

Becoming a parent had an impact on the young mothers' social networks, especially their relationship with their families. For some, this meant quarreling about childcare, and for others, rejection and no economic aid from their family at all, though it was sorely needed, given how young they were and the limited support they got from the State.

Single motherhood cannot be interpreted deterministically as an obstacle to desistance, but early parenthood in combination with living in precarious and marginalized settings was frequently the experience of women that saw being a single mother as a negative turning point in their life course (see also Lorentzen & Syltevik, 2023). This was the case for some men too. Nicolás, for instance, explained why he had to commit more crime after having a child in his early twenties:

> I was a bit desperate. Because we needed money, more than usual. All of a sudden. So, I was freaking out, thinking about a place to live, food. (…). It is different from planning for one or two people. You can skip a meal or two (…). Come back after some days of partying. With a kid you can't (Bolivia, first child in early twenties).

Having children meant needing to find more money, and if they could not access the legal job market, they had to take the options that were available to them. This meant either scaling up their illegal activities or, sometimes, venturing into crime for the first time. Rocío got involved in an insurance fraud scheme through a friend: "My husband was still working, and I would stay home. But then it became obvious that money for everyday things was running short" (Mexico, first child at 17).

Parenthood affected men and women in a similar way, as regards the urgent need for money and they sometimes described their new role as parents as the triggering factor or turning point for their criminal career. Some women, like Sofía, also described how they had to "go back to the streets" (Argentina, first child at 16) to make money, leaving family members to take care of their children. Becoming a parent may prompt an increase in criminal activities to make ends meet (Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010). In these cases, the factors that may lead people to become involved in crime in the first place, such as widespread unemployment and structural discrimination, were added to by the need to support a child.

6. Discussion

In both the Global North literature of life course criminology (e.g., Kreager et al., 2010) and previous studies from relatively economically stable and affluent contexts in Latin America (Droppelmann, 2022; Masone et al., 2017; Mettifogo et al., 2015; Vigna, 2011), pregnancies are usually described as initiating desistance. Despite critical discussions on this topic (e.g., Abell, 2018), the standard hypothesis persists, proposing that parenthood serves as a turning point that fosters a sense of purpose and reduces criminal behavior (Van Vugt & Versteegh, 2020; see also Connolly et al., 2012). Similar tendencies can also be identified in participants in this research. The most important finding in this study, however, is that parenthood was often associated with negative changes, increasing vulnerability, and marginalization.

Our study reveals that the predominantly negative impact of parenthood in our sample stands in contrast to the trends commonly highlighted in the literature. This discrepancy can be better understood when considered within the context of institutional weakness in Latin America, as reflected in various interview descriptions of the participants' social environments and economic circumstances. In the absence of robust state institutions—such as hospitals and childcare services—that could mitigate the effects of socioeconomic inequality and address the needs associated with raising children, individuals are forced to rely on familiar survival strategies (Viscardi, 2006). The results is that participants often perceived parenthood as a source of pressure and a frustrating reminder of the scarcity of resources, particularly for those already struggling to meet their own basic needs.

In many criminal life course trajectories, parenthood even increased criminal involvement. This is particularly noticeable in the case of women, highlighting a significant gender difference that may partly explain the proportional rise in female incarceration (Buxton et al., 2020; Enos, 2017; Simmons, 2017). While the negative effect of parenthood in relation to crime is not unreported in previous studies, we argue that it could well be particularly important to understanding criminal life course trajectories in Latin America. Examining how these factors intersect can deepen our theorization of both desistance and parenthood, offering new insights into how social environments and structural challenges influence individuals' paths away from crime.

Most participants became parents in their late teens, mirroring the fertility trends observed among low social strata in these countries (CELADE, 2022). Early parenthood is largely brought about by economic, political, institutional, and religious factors: poverty, the illegality of abortion, barriers to access to reproductive health care, and the Catholic ban on contraception. Life course approaches can point to problems that might arise if adulthood is precipitated by early parenthood in marginalized socio-economic contexts (Torrado, 2007). For example, many of the problems described above might have been aggravated by the young age at which most participants had their first child. Financial, social, and emotional dependence upon family is still considerable at this age and it is easier to become isolated in violent intimate relationships. The chances of securing a job in the formal labor market might also be more remote at younger ages.

Most participants typically embarked on a criminal trajectory before becoming parents (see also Kessler, 2010). Whether their initial involvement in crime included "amateur" petty offenses, small peer group delinquency, or more organized forms of criminal activity (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2010; Kessler, 2010; Viscardi, 2006), participants were usually engaged in crime prior to transitioning into parenthood. This suggests that parenthood was generally not a turning point which triggered the initial onset of crime, but rather a factor that increased involvement in the crime participants were already engaged in.

Our study suggests that the negative consequences of parenthood are deeply gendered, with women experiencing significantly worse outcomes than men. While fatherhood is often perceived as a loss of freedom—such as the obligation to spend more time with a newly formed family—women frequently describe parenthood as entrapment, characterized by abusive relationships and the erosion of social support (Chang et al., 2010; EIGE, 2023). Additionally, women face greater economic disadvantages as a result of parenthood compared to men (Van Vugt & Versteegh, 2020). Although gender differences in the impact of parenthood have been noted in earlier studies (King et al., 2007; Pyrooz et al., 2017; Schinkel, 2019), the patriarchal structures prevalent in Latin American societies intensify the marginalization that parenthood can bring, particularly for women, and may contribute to increased criminal behavior.

Furthermore, as noted by Abell (2018), the gendered experience of parenthood are shaped by context. Participants highlighted how social circumstances, such as access to employment opportunities and social support, significantly influenced how parenthood was experienced. For instance, motherhood could be perceived as either an oppressive force within a relationship or a stabilizing factor in one's lifestyle, largely depending on the availability of support or the perceived viability of achieving financial independence. The socio-economic context of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and a large informal economy is thus crucial for understanding how financial need influences criminal

trajectories (Kessler, 2010). For those with access to legal employment, parenthood can motivate a shift towards stable and low-risk income sources. However, for individuals without a realistic opportunity to secure legal work, parenthood may instead push them deeper into criminal activities. Latin America's poverty, structural inequality and high fertility rates and teenage pregnancies—creates a context in which these criminal trajectories are more likely to emerge.

7. Conclusion

We have demonstrated the divergent consequences of parenthood on criminal trajectories in Latin America, an understudied region in this regard, and explored in detail the different gendered mechanisms that shape these outcomes. The positive changes following parenthood included a perceived need to change and slow down, which sometimes led participants to quit crime or reduce their involvement in it. Parenthood could also stabilize supportive relationships and create a need for a stable, risk-free income that led participants to seek jobs in the legal economy. The identification of several important negative changes following parenthood might, however, be this study's most important contribution. Frustration arising from feelings that one is failing as a parent, and increased stress and rejection by one's family are two consequences of having children that may fuel crime. Parenthood can also solidify abusive relationships and lead to the loss of social support. In a socio-economic context of poverty, widespread unemployment, and the lack of opportunities to succeed in the legal economy, parenthood can also trigger or increase economically motivated crime.

Our study makes clear that it is a mistake to neglect the specificities of gender and socio-economic circumstances when analyzing parenthood as a turning point. It also highlights the importance of place and historical change (Elder, 1994) for criminal trajectories. Studying the role of parenthood across Latin America, reveals how parenthood both foster desistance and fuels criminal pathways in the lives of those currently imprisoned in this region. In contexts of structural poverty and high unemployment, particularly in regions of the Global South where illegal economies often prevail over legal ones, we contend that parenthood may result in heightened criminal involvement rather than a shift towards disengagement from crime.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Martín Hernán Di Marco: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sveinung Sandberg:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Gustavo Fondevila:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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