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Does Child Abuse Cause Crime?

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Child maltreatment roughly doubles the probability that an individual engages in many types of crime. This is true even if we compare twins, one of whom was maltreated when the other one was not.

Child maltreatment, which includes both child abuse and child neglect, is a major social problem. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, over a million children are victims of maltreatment annually. Over half a million children suffer serious injuries, and about 1500 children die, making child maltreatment the leading cause of deaths from injuries in children over a year old. In addition to this appalling immediate toll, child abuse is thought to have many harmful long-term consequences.

In **Does Child Abuse Cause Crime?** (NBER Working Paper No. [12171](#)), authors **Janet Currie** and **Erdal Tekin** focus on the effect of child maltreatment on crime using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). They focus on crime because it is one of the most socially costly potential outcomes of maltreatment, and because the proposed mechanisms linking maltreatment and crime are relatively well elucidated in the literature.

The authors find that child maltreatment roughly doubles the probability that an individual engages in many types of crime. This is true even if we compare twins, one of whom was maltreated when the other one was not. It is useful to put this result in perspective by comparing it to other estimates of the effects of factors related to crime. For example, using time-series data from New York, previous researchers found that a single percentage point decline in unemployment generates only a 2.2 percentage point decline in burglaries, and that a 10 percent increase in the

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minimum wage leads to about a 3.5 percent decrease in robberies in New York City.

The authors cite various studies that show that having access to a gun at home increases the propensity to commit a variety of crimes, by about 30 percent among adolescents. Decreases in gun ownership over the 1990s can explain up to a third of the decline in crime over the same period. Exposure to firearm violence approximately doubles the probability that an adolescent will engage in serious violence over the subsequent two years, so that effects of maltreatment are similar to those of exposure to gun violence.

One potential explanation for the large effects is that children who experience maltreatment start engaging in crime earlier, an explanation that appears to be supported by studies the authors highlight. Abused or neglected children are more likely to be arrested as both juveniles and as adults. Starting to engage in criminal behavior early may increase illegal human capital by raising experience in criminal activities, and decrease human capital in legitimate activities, such as schooling or being in the labor market. This would further increase criminal propensities.

Estimates suggest that the crime induced by abuse costs society about \$6.7 billion per year at the low end and up to \$62.5 billion at the high end. The estimates depend on the social costs attributed to crime, and specifically, whether those costs include estimates of willingness to pay to avoid crime.

It would be interesting to compare these figures to the cost of preventing maltreatment, but few intervention programs have been proven to be effective in rigorous studies. The sole exception is randomized trials of nurse home-visit programs that start in infancy, which have shown that they can reduce the incidence of substantiated cases of maltreatment by 50 percent. At a cost of about \$4,000 per child, the total cost of providing this service to all children would be about \$16 billion. Given that the crime induced by abuse is only one of the social costs of maltreatment, these estimates suggest that such a home visiting program might well pay for itself in terms of reducing social costs, even based on conservative estimates of the costs of crime. If society attaches some benefit to improving the

lives of poor children (beyond the value we attach to saving people money), then the cost-benefit analysis of prevention programs begins to look even more favorable.

The authors provide evidence that the apparent negative effects of maltreatment on children's propensity to engage in crime are real and not simply artifacts of other features of dysfunctional families. They find that being maltreated approximately doubles the probability of engaging in many types of crime and that the effects are worst for children from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, boys are at greater risk for increases in criminal propensities than girls. Sexual abuse appears to have the largest effects on crime, perhaps justifying the emphasis on this type of abuse in the literature and in the media. Finally, the probability of engaging in crime increases with the experience of multiple forms of maltreatment as well as the experience of involvement with Child Protective Services. These findings suggest that criminal behavior increases not only with the incidence of maltreatment but also with the severity of maltreatment.

-- Les Picker

Pass-Through of Tariffs: Evidence from European Wine Imports

The incidence of tariffs on producers, in the form of lower pre-tariff prices, and consumers, in the form of higher tariff-inclusive prices, is a long-standing issue in international economics. While economic theory suggests various possibilities, empirical evidence on the distribution of tariff...

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A minimum pay law for gig delivery workers in Seattle doubled base pay per task but resulted in reduced tips, fewer available tasks, and no net increase in monthly earnings.

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The Earnings of Community College Bachelor's Degree Graduates

Students who receive bachelor's degrees from community colleges have median annual earnings 14 percent greater than associate degree holders from the same institutions, but earn less than traditional bachelor's graduates in the same fields and states.

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Employment Outcomes in Opportunity Zones

The Opportunity Zone (OZ) program, created under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, represents one of the largest place-based economic development initiatives in US history. It offers substantial capital gains tax relief to investors who direct funds into 8,764 designated census tracts across the...

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Smoking Patterns and the Widening US Mortality Gap

Over the past three decades, the life expectancy gap between Americans with and without college degrees widened from 2.6 years in 1992 to 6.3 years. At the same time, geographic differences in mortality have increased dramatically. Rural counties that once enjoyed lower mortality rates than urban...

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Job Growth in Counties Targeted by the CHIPS and Science Act

The CHIPS and Science Act generated approximately 15,000 direct semiconductor jobs and twice as many indirect jobs in affected counties.

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Do Rideshare Users Comparison Shop?

Rideshare users in New York City compare prices between Uber and Lyft only 16 percent of the time, leaving money on the table.

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Financial Reporting Practices and Firm Productivity

Variation in the quality of financial accounting reporting can explain more than 10 percent of the dispersion in productivity across private US firms.

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Rate of Return on Emerging Market Infrastructure Projects

Roughly 1 billion people live more than two kilometers from an all-season road, primarily in emerging-market and developing economies (EMDEs), where limited access to paved roads constrains growth and development. Despite a critical investment shortfall, in the absence of readily accessible data on...

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The UK's 2016 decision to leave the EU lowered per capita GDP nine years later by more than 6 percent.

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Are There Predictable Errors in Investor Expectations?

Investors make predictable mistakes when forecasting earnings and stock returns, but machine learning models avoid them through adaptive learning.

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Reallocation of Global Supply Chains

Between 2017 and mid-2025, China's share of US imports fell from 21 to 9 percent, with displaced trade reallocated primarily among existing top-20 US trade partners.

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Cross-Country Redistribution from Eurozone Monetary Policy

The eurozone is a monetary union without a fiscal union: Each national central bank is ultimately backed by its own government. When the European Central Bank (ECB) engages in cross-border lending or asset purchasing, the gains and losses are borne unevenly by taxpayers in different countries. In...

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The Rise of High-Skilled Migration from Asia to the US

Rising US skill demand and Asia's education boom fueled high-skill migration, reshaping innovation, universities, and healthcare.

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Technological Advance and Labor Demand: Evidence from Two Centuries

There have been concerns about technological progress displacing workers since the start of the Industrial Revolution, but systematic evidence on how such advances affect labor demand is limited. In *Technology and Labor Markets: Past, Present, and Future; Evidence from Two Centuries of Innovation ...*

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The Economic Costs of Noise Pollution from Aircraft and Traffic

In Planes Overhead: How Airplane Noise Impacts Home Values (NBER Working Paper 34431), Florian Allroggen, R. John Hansman, Christopher R. Knittel, Jing Li, Xibo Wan, and Juju Wang examine how changes in aircraft noise exposure affect residential property values near Boston Logan International,...

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Projecting Federal Deficits and Debt

The US federal budget situation has changed dramatically in the last 25 years. In 2001, projected surpluses totaling \$5.6 trillion over the ensuing 10 years were expected to eliminate all public debt by 2006. At the end of the 2024 fiscal year, federal debt held by the public stood at approximately...

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A 2019 US reform of Organ Procurement Organizations increased kidney recoveries by 29 percent and resulted in an estimated \$359 million in fiscal savings.

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School Cell Phone Bans and Student Achievement

An all-day cell phone ban within a Florida school district improved test scores, particularly for male students and in middle and high schools.

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Consumer Response to a Tax on Sweetened Beverages

A one-cent-per-ounce tax on sweetened beverages in Cook County, Illinois, reduced household purchases of taxed beverages by 22.5 percent during its four-month implementation, but purchases returned to baseline levels immediately after repeal.

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Variation in Working Hours Across Countries and Over Time

Global working hours follow a bell-shaped pattern with economic development, with prime-age hours remaining remarkably stable as male hours fall and female hours rise.

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Common leadership between two firms increases the probability of a no-poaching agreement by 11 percentage points.

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Product Quality Improvement and US Manufacturing Productivity

Conventional measures suggest that US manufacturing productivity has stagnated over the past 15 years. In *Why Is Manufacturing Productivity Growth So Low?* (NBER Working Paper 34264) Enghin Atalay, Ali Hortaşu, Nicole Kimmel, and Chad Syverson challenge this finding and suggest changes to the...

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By investing in agricultural research about local ecological conditions, Brazil's Embrapa more than doubled national agricultural productivity.

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Job Mismatch and Early Career Outcomes

Quasi-random job assignments in the US Air Force suggest that overqualified workers outperform others in the same job but have higher turnover, while underqualified workers show greater commitment but are less productive.

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Low financial literacy and misperceptions significantly limit college savings account participation and saving.

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Investment Returns of Nonprofit Endowments

Endowments sustain the operations and activities of many nonprofit organizations, yet little is known about how they are invested or the returns that they earn. In *The Risk, Reward, and Asset Allocation of Nonprofit Endowment Funds* (NBER Working Paper 34078), Andrew W. Lo, Egor V. Matveyev, and...

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Hospital Acquisitions of Physician Practices Generate Price Increases Without Evidence of Quality Improvements

When hospitals acquire physician practices, prices increase for both, but there is little evidence of quality improvement.

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Shifting Wealth of US Age Groups

In 1983, the average wealth of American households headed by someone aged 75 or older was 5 percent greater than the national average; in 2022, it was 55 percent greater. Gains in owner-occupied housing and the stock market, and reduced mortgage debt, were key contributors.

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Universal occupational licensing recognition allows physicians from any state to practice without relicensing, increasing patient access to personal doctors and reducing cost barriers.

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Revisiting the Relationship Between Interest Rates and Government Borrowing

A 1 percentage point increase in the US debt-to-GDP ratio raises the five-year-ahead five-year Treasury rate by about 3 basis points.

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Municipal Debt and Public Services During the Great Depression

Cities with more debt maturing, which were highly exposed to the financial market turmoil of the Great Depression, made larger cuts in public spending.

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Declining Fertility in Wealthy Nations

Falling birth rates in high-income countries are not well explained by traditional economic models but likely reflect a fundamental reordering of adult priorities shaped by social and cultural forces.

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Countries that use subtitling rather than dubbing for foreign TV content demonstrate significantly higher English proficiency.

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Landlords' significant smoothing of rent increases for continuing tenants is a key factor in the CPI shelter index's slow response to market rent changes.

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Post-Pandemic Disinflation in the Historical Context

Analysis of monetary policy cycles in 24 advanced economies finds that delayed and aggressive rate hikes after the pandemic combined with strong central bank credibility contributed to historically low output losses per unit of disinflation, but also a large increase in prices.

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China's Expansion of Drug Insurance Increased Access While Containing Costs

China's pharmaceutical insurance reform, which combined centralized price negotiation with insurance expansion, reduced cancer drug prices by 57 percent while increasing access nearly tenfold.

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Expelling Japanese Americans Lowered US Farm Productivity

A 1 percent reduction in the share of Japanese American farmers in a county's farm labor force caused a 12 percent decline in agricultural growth.

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The Decline of the US Treasury Premium

The “convenience yield” on US Treasury bonds has declined as the supply of these bonds has grown.

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Private Sector Responses to Public Transit Initiatives

When Lagos, Nigeria, introduced public buses, private minibus departures declined by 16 percent on competing routes while fares fell across the network.

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Privacy Regulation and Transatlantic Venture Investment

In the past decade, venture capital activity in the European Union (EU) has lagged that in the United States, with annual venture capital investments averaging 0.2 percent of GDP compared to 0.7 percent in the US. Since 2013, US-based venture capital funds have out-raised their EU partners by about ...

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Unpacking the Union Wage Premium

In Canada, about 60 percent of the union wage premium comes from unions' ability to negotiate higher wages, while the balance is from unionized firms being more productive than

their nonunionized counterparts.

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Firm Size and Currency Choice in Japanese Exports

Large Japanese exporters are more likely than small ones to invoice in US dollars because they are better positioned to manage currency risk.

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Financial Institutions and Supply Chain Dynamics

During the 2018–19 US-China trade war, American firms exposed to tariffs, particularly those with ties to banks with trade finance operations in Asia, shifted their supply chains from China to other Asian countries.

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Children whose parents divorce experience reduced adult earnings and higher rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration.

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The Changing Distribution of the Return to Higher Education

Since 1960, the wage premium from attending college for students from high- and low-income families has diverged.

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Energy Access and Industrial Specialization

How does access to energy resources shape regional industrial development? In Local Energy Access and Industry Specialization: Evidence from World War II Emergency Pipelines (NBER Working Paper 33721), Jacob Greenspon and Gordon H. Hanson examine this question by studying how emergency pipelines...

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Federal Fiscal Aid to State and Local Governments and COVID-19 Mortality

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