

Are there biosocial origins for antisocial behavior?

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An assistant professor at Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice is working to unlock the mysteries surrounding the role that genetics and environmental influences play on criminal and antisocial behavior.

"Biosocial research is a multi-disciplinary way of studying antisocial behavior," said Dr. Brian Boutwell. "It involves aspects of [behavioral genetics](#), neuroscience, [evolutionary biology](#) and [developmental psychology](#). Additionally, it incorporates different analytical techniques and research methods to examine criminal and antisocial behaviors."

For centuries now, many scholars have pointed to the role that [biological factors](#) play in sculpting human behavior. The incorporation of biology, however, into the study of criminal behaviors remains in its infancy and on the fringes of criminology. Dr. Boutwell specializes in this emerging area of research and has used it in recent studies examining [corporal punishment](#), rape, stalking and IQ.

In an article recently published in the journal *Aggressive Behavior*, Dr. Boutwell examined the relationship between [genetic risk factors](#) for antisocial behavior and the use of corporal punishment in childhood. While prior research has linked the use of corporal punishment with aggression, psychopathology, and criminal involvement, Boutwell explores why not all children who are spanked develop such tendencies.

The study, co-authored by Drs. Courtney Franklin (SHSU), J.C. Barnes

(The University of Texas at Dallas) and Kevin M. Beaver (Florida State University), suggested that genetic risk factors conditioned the effects of spanking on antisocial behavior. Specifically, children who possessed a [genetic predisposition](#) for antisocial behavior appeared to be most susceptible to the negative influences of spanking. Interestingly, this gene-environment interaction appeared to be especially important for male participants and not female children in the sample.

Dr. Boutwell's research also examined a link between life course persistent offenders and rape. Based on the developmental theory proposed by Terrie Moffitt, the study found that the small segment of the population known to be chronically aggressive—termed life course persistent offenders—are significantly more likely to rape, and do so repeatedly over their lifetime. Based on these findings and prior research, the study suggests that the origins of rape, in part, may be genetic. More studies are ongoing to test this link.

In another ongoing study with SHSU colleagues Drs. Matt Nobles and Todd Armstrong, Dr. Boutwell is examining the genetic and environmental correlates of stalking. Data were gathered from a sample of students enrolled in criminal justice classes at Sam Houston State University, and featured survey questionnaires containing items on behavioral, environmental, and demographic factors, including scales of stalking behaviors, intimate partner violence, and relationship attachment. The study also collected DNA from the participants in the form of a cheek swab in order to examine measured genes that may be linked to stalking behavior.

Finally, Dr. Boutwell and his lab of graduate and undergraduate students are doing research on the link between genetics, antisocial behavior and intelligence. Their findings show a link between the genetic risk factors that corresponded to increased [antisocial behavior](#) and decreased cognitive functioning.

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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