

# Commit a crime? Loved ones got your back

September 24 2019

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Reading about a child abuse case or someone burglarizing homes often stirs feelings of disgust, anger and disbelief when it's learned the perpetrator's family or friends did nothing to stop it or report it to police.

But when it's your own family member or friend who committed the

crime, you're less likely to do anything as well, according to a new University of Michigan study.

The findings, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, indicate that people are more likely to protect those close to them when moral infractions are committed, particularly highly severe acts such as theft, blackmail and groping.

Regardless of gender, political orientation, morals or disgust by the offense, the tendency is to not sacrifice the relationship—even for the good of society. Researchers expressed surprise that people tend to become more protective of a loved one as the severity of the crime increases.

"We were really taken aback to see that most people predict that they will protect those close to them even in the face of heinous moral infractions," said Aaron Weidman, a psychology research fellow and the study's co-lead author.

Weidman and colleagues analyzed the responses from more than 2,800 people across 10 studies. They tested whether people are more likely to report that they'd protect those close to them (versus strangers) after imagining them commit immoral acts of theft and [sexual harassment](#).

For example, participants were asked to imagine that a police officer asked them if they knew anything about an immoral act they had witnessed. They were more willing to lie (and thus break the law) to protect someone close to them, such as a family member or close friend.

On the other hand, if the perpetrator was a stranger, participants wanted the individual to be formally punished, possibly turning them in to [law enforcement](#) or subjecting them to social ostracizing.

To understand these results, the research team examined potential psychological explanations for this behavior. They found that many people justify their decision to protect those they know and love by reporting that they'd discipline the perpetrator on their own. By doing this, people maintain their self-image as a morally upstanding individual, as well as preserving the close relationship, the researchers said.

"Loyalty is a powerful motivator that, under certain circumstances, can override other virtues like honesty." said Walter Sowden, the study's other lead author, and former U-M psychology doctoral student who is now an Army research psychologist.

The researchers also demonstrated how this pervasive bias to protect friends and loved ones could be attenuated—by instructing people to adopt a psychologically distanced perspective. In two experiments, they found that asking participants to reason about the most severe forms of moral transgression from a third-person perspective nudged them toward making the more ethical decision.

**More information:** Aaron C. Weidman et al, Punish or Protect? How Close Relationships Shape Responses to Moral Violations, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167219873485](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219873485)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Commit a crime? Loved ones got your back (2019, September 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-09-commit-crime.html>

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