



Individual and contextual influences on delinquency: the role of the single-parent family

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Abstract

Research indicates that children are at risk for delinquency if they live in a single-parent family and if they live in areas with high levels of family disruption. Although there is a substantial amount of research on both the individual and aggregate relationships, examining delinquency at either of these two levels alone is not appropriate. Specifically, families do not exist in isolation as individual-level research inherently assumes, and aggregate research is concerned with explaining rates of delinquency as opposed to explaining influences on individual behavior. The current research used data from thirty-five schools, an important adolescent context, to determine the individual- and school-level effects of single-parent families on delinquency. The results from an overdispersed Poisson HLM regression model suggest both individual and aggregate effects, with a potential buffering effect of intact families regardless of any adolescents' specific family structure.

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Introduction

Both individual- and aggregate-level theories suggest that family structure is an important factor related to delinquency. Although both levels have been examined in isolation, there is no research explicitly modeling both effects simultaneously. Furthermore, each level of explanation implies different things, increasing the importance of properly separating the two levels of effects. This study advanced the criminological literature concerning the link between single-parent families and delinquency by exploring the theoretically important relationships in a methodologically appropriate way, using a multilevel design in order to separate the two levels of effects. Furthermore, this research argues that schools are an appropriate unit for assessing contextual effects on delinquency. This argument is based on (1) research

suggesting that delinquency is often a group event and (2) the nature of school in terms of both pulling together same-aged children and creating a context favorable towards friendship formation and maintenance.

Individual-level research

There are many possible reasons why the absence of a parent in the home is associated with an adolescent's risk for delinquency, such as lower income (McLanahan, 1985) or higher residential mobility (Astone & McLanahan, 1994). The prevailing criminological notion follows research indicating that two parents are better able to care for, supervise, and socialize children than one parent (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hirschi, 1969; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In general, both parents are important and the absence of one weakens family functioning.

These general concepts are reflected in the notion of social control, particularly informal social control. The family is an important socializing and super-

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vision agent, and the notion is that a child is exposed to lower levels of both types of social control when one of the two parents is missing (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Mulligan, 1960; Nye, 1957). Lower levels of supervision and effective socialization are associated with delinquency whether the child has one parent or two. Children with one parent are at higher risk of delinquency, then, because there is one less person capable of supervision. Thus, parental absence, in a very broad sense, is likely to reduce the level of social control to which the child is exposed.

Recent criminological research concerning the effect of single-parent families on delinquency is rather sparse. Primarily due to backlash over the Moynihan Report in 1965, criminologists stopped looking directly at the relationship between broken homes and delinquency (Wilkinson, 1974). Instead, researchers focused on which family processes increased an adolescent's risk for delinquency when weakened. This shift in focus created a base of research with mixed results because studies did not examine the direct effect of single-parent families. This variation is partly attributable to the difference between older research that examined the total effect of living in a single-parent family and current research that usually reports the family structure effect after controlling statistically for other variables. Two meta-analyses illustrate this variability. First, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) found thirty-three of forty analyses with a strong, statistically significant association between broken homes or parental absence and a child's delinquency or aggression for cross-sectional studies. In contrast, Lipsey and Derzon (1998) reported broken homes as one of the weakest predictors of violent or serious delinquency for ages six to fourteen. Neither of these reviews discussed whether the effect sizes for family structure on delinquency are direct, indirect, or total effects. Both reviews suggested that living in a single-parent family increased an adolescent's risk for delinquency as compared with living with two parents.

In sum, most individual-level studies of delinquency include a measure of family structure, but only as a control variable. Nevertheless, there is evidence that living in a single-parent family does increase an adolescent's risk for delinquency as compared with living with two parents. Unfortunately, current research has not adequately explored this relationship.

Aggregate-level research

There is also an aggregate-level relationship posited between family structure and the delinquency rates of an area. The aggregate-level relationship is different from the individual-level relationship dis-

cussed above. Specifically, whereas individual-level research explores the effects of living with one parent on the delinquent behavior of a particular adolescent, aggregate-level research explores how the proportion of single-parent families within some social unit potentially place a social unit, and by extension all children within that unit, at risk for higher rates of delinquency. Currently, most aggregate-level research stems from social disorganization theory and uses the neighborhood as the unit of analysis.

The essence of social disorganization theory is that, at the aggregate level, informal social control mechanisms are not working effectively; the community is not able to manage the behavior of its residents (Bursik, 1988; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, p. 39; Sampson & Groves, 1989, p. 777; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994, p. 44). The ability of a community to overcome common problems is hindered when formal and informal ties are not developed. Thus, the community is not able to rally against criminogenic forces that result from the weak levels of control because there is a deficit in the collective monitoring of individuals. For example, one important dimension of Shaw and McKay's (1969) framework of social disorganization was the ability to control peer groups (see Sampson & Groves, 1989, p. 778; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994, p. 58). Peer groups are of considerable importance because delinquency often is a group event (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927). The ability of a community to control these peer groups is thought to be directly and positively correlated with the community's delinquency rates.

Shaw and McKay (1942, p. 20) suggested that residential mobility, poverty, and ethnic/racial heterogeneity undermined formal and informal community ties by decreasing communication and increasing anonymity among residents, thereby decreasing the chances someone will intervene to control the behavior of children (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, p. 7). In 1987, Sampson argued that family disruption affects crime in a similar fashion. One reason was that a high level of single-parent families in a community weakens informal social controls (Sampson, 1987, p. 351; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994, p. 56). Informal controls are those controls most likely to affect unsupervised peer groups, one of the leading predictors of higher neighborhood delinquency rates (Sampson & Groves, 1989, p. 778). Essentially, due to the presence of many households with absent adults, there are fewer adults available for the day-to-day monitoring of their own children and other children in the area (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, 1987, p. 353). Informal social controls are weakened when there are high numbers of missing parents. This reasoning suggests an emergent property of single-parent families. That is, the adolescent in the setting with many single-

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