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

Amy L. Anderson*

Crime, Law, and Justice Department, The Pennsylvania State University, 211 Oswald Tower, University Park, PA 16802, USA

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.

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-
different from the individual-level relationship dis-

erates of an area. The aggregate-level relationship is

ited between family structure and the delinquency

Aggregate-level research

nately, current research has not adequately explored

compared with living with two parents. Unfortu-

increase an adolescent’s risk for delinquency as

as compared with living with two parents.

both types of social control when one of the two parents is missing (Gottfredson &


tive socialization are associated with delinquency whether the child has

Children with one parent are at a 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

Moyhnnan Report in 1965, criminologists stopped

looking directly at the relationship between broken
homes and delinquency (Wilkinson, 1974). Instead,

researchers focused on which family processes in-

creased 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 re-

search that usually reports the family structure effect

after controlling statistically for other variables. Two

meta-analyses illustrate this variability. First, Loeb-

er 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 Der-

zon (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

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 delin-

quency 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. Unfortu-

ately, current research has not adequately explored

this relationship.

Aggregate-level research

There is also an aggregate-level relationship pos-

ited 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 com-

munity 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 for-

mal 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 consid-

erable 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 hetero-
genety undermined formal and informal community

ties by decreasing communication and increasing

anonymity among residents, thereby decreasing the

chances someone will intervene to control the behav-

ior 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 weak-

ens 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 &


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-
دریافت فوری
متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۳ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات