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## Family, welfare, and delinquency

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### Abstract

Data from a five-wave panel probability sample of families in the State of Washington were analyzed to test the hypothesis that female headship and welfare experience increased participation in and frequency of juvenile delinquency. Appropriate statistical models of random effect probit and negative binomial were employed. Results indicated that there were no direct effects of female headship and welfare experience on either prevalence or frequency of juvenile delinquency. Instead, it was found that the number of adult presence in a household and the child's school attachment significantly reduced the probability of delinquency and the tendency of being referred again in court.

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### Introduction

Family structure was one of the most controversial factors that was singled out for analysis and reanalysis in delinquency literature. Among the various forms of family structure, female headship caused particular concern in recent decades because nearly 90 percent of single-parent families were headed by females (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Bray and Hetherington (1993) estimated as many as 40 percent of White children and 75 percent of African American children would experience parental separation or divorce before they reached age sixteen. Since single-parent homes were commonly considered a weakened social institution and a direct cause of delinquency among children (Hirschi, 1995; McCord, 1982; Nye, 1958; Shaw & McKay, 1932), it was very important to develop a better

understanding of the relationship. The existing literature on the relationship between female-headed families and juvenile delinquency, however, was limited in two major ways. First, the prevalence and the incidence of delinquency were generally lumped together, and second, the effect of welfare on delinquency was not controlled for. As a result, there was very limited consensus among scholars with respect to the effect of female-headed family on juvenile delinquency (Austin, 1992; Hirschi, 1995; Van Voorhis, Cullen, Mathers, & Garner, 1988).

The purpose of this research was to examine the direct relationship of female headship and welfare on juvenile delinquency. The concept of delinquency was split into two separate concepts of delinquency, where prevalence of delinquency captured the number of persons committing delinquent acts in the sample while incidence of delinquency tapped the number of delinquent acts committed per offender (Farrington, 1987; Paternoster & Triplett, 1988). Based on panel data collected from a family income study in the State of Washington, this article attempts to advance current knowledge in two

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respects: (1) Does female headship and the duration of welfare, directly and/or jointly, contribute to participation in juvenile delinquency (prevalence)?; and (2) Are these factors also associated with the extent of delinquency (frequency)? In doing so, the alternative hypothesis that once adult supervision and school attachment were controlled, female headship and welfare experience did not significantly affect delinquency was tested.

### Previous research

The relationship between a single parent or “broken home” background and juvenile delinquency was one of the most enduring themes explored implicitly and explicitly in almost all theories of juvenile delinquency. Since family was often seen as the cradle of delinquency, single-parent homes were commonly considered a weakened social institution and a direct cause of delinquency among children (Hirschi, 1995; Nye, 1958; Rankin & Kern, 1994; Shaw & McKay, 1932).

Various social control theories maintained that the probability of deviance increased when an individual’s bond to society was weakened or broken. Nye (1958) argued that family was the primary group representing society. It could generate direct control, internalized control, indirect control, and control through alternative means of need satisfaction. Other social institutions, such as school, could provide similar control, but would be less powerful. When an individual’s social ties to such key societal institutions, as family and school were weak or broken, the risk of delinquency would increase (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Glueck and Glueck (1950) specifically argued that broken family structure weakened family’s supervision over children. They pointed that the lack of parental supervision in a female-headed home was a leading cause of juvenile delinquency.

During the past two decades, there were a number of reviews of studies documenting the relationship between delinquency and family disruption or female headship (Geismar & Wood, 1986; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; McLanahan & Booth, 1991; Wells & Rankin, 1991). As Van Voorhis et al. (1988) pointed out, however, the consensus of this “literature on the literature” was that the research was inconclusive concerning the direct negative relationship between family structure and delinquency.

Some empirical studies reported a significant impact of family disruption on delinquency (Ensminger, Kellam, & Rubin, 1983; Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Matsueda & Heimer, 1987; McLanahan & Booth, 1991; Rankin & Kern, 1994; Thornberry, Smith,

Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1999). Wells and Rankin’s (1991, p. 79) mega-analysis of fifty different studies, for example, found that “for most of the studies, broken homes (or family structure) has a consistent and reliable association with juvenile delinquency, ranging from  $\phi = .05$  and  $.15$ .” Matsueda and Heimer (1987) developed a complicated structural equation model of delinquency and found that broken homes had a significant direct effect on both Black and White delinquency although the effect was greater for Black delinquency than Whites. Similarly, Rankin and Kern (1994) concluded that children in single-parent homes had a greater probability of committing delinquent acts than children living in intact homes. Despite the sophisticated statistical models, these studies relied on old data sets before 1980 and used cross-sectional research designs. Their measures of delinquency provided little accurate information about either the prevalence or incidence. Where respondents were questioned about the incidence, the categories were imprecise (e.g., “frequently” or “sometimes”) or wide-ranging (e.g., three or more acts).

Other empirical studies revealed little or no impact of family disruption on delinquency (Nagin & Smith, 1990; Rosen & Neilson, 1982; Smith & Brame, 1994; Van Voorhis et al., 1988; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993). These studies suggested that the relationship between single-mother households and delinquency was weak at best (Rosen & Neilson, 1982). Some of these studies used longitudinal designs and employed more appropriate techniques of analysis in dealing with this relationship (Nagin & Smith, 1990; Smith & Brame, 1994). Family structure, however, was treated only as a control variable in the multivariate models and little attempt was made to explain what social conditions might account for the effect of family and whether effect of family would be the same on prevalence and on incidence.

Surprisingly, the relationship between welfare experience and delinquency was largely ignored in the delinquency literature.<sup>1</sup> Although there was evidence that poverty and dependence on welfare were more pronounced among female-headed families (McLanahan & Garfinkel, 1993), the link between delinquency and welfare experience was rarely empirically explored by criminologists (but see McLanahan & Booth, 1991). Politicians, however, often debated on the relationship between welfare and crime (DeFronzo, 1996). Conservative politicians argued that high and easily accessible levels of welfare assistance might promote criminogenic lifestyles primarily by prompting many poor people to raise their children in female-headed families, thereby undermining traditional crime-limiting family patterns and values such as the two-parent household and the “work ethic.” Within academia, rational

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