

Reassessing the family-delinquency association: Do family type, family processes, and economic factors make a difference?

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Abstract

The present study drew on four competing theoretical perspectives to examine the relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquency. Using data from the Add Health Study, the authors examined nonserious and serious delinquent behavior across youth from different types of households and also considered how the association between family structure and delinquency might be conditioned by family processes and economic factors. Results from negative binomial regression analyses indicated that, in general, type of household was not a significant predictor of nonserious or serious delinquency. Rather, maternal attachment emerged as the most important determinant of delinquent behavior among youth from all family types. The results are discussed within the context of Hirschi's original interpretation of social control theory and future directions for research are suggested.

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Introduction

Various versions of social disorganization theories (e.g., Sampson, 1992; Shaw & McKay, 1932), social control theories (e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1958), subcultural theories (e.g., Lewis, 1961; Miller, 1958), and life-course perspectives (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993; Thornberry, 1987) cite family as a major factor in the explanation of delinquent behavior. Much of the research literature on the subject indicates that the family generally encourages conformity of youth by monitoring behavior, applying consistent discipline, and developing parent-child attachments (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Patterson, 1982). Scholars are not in agreement, however, as to whether single parents are as

effective as two parents in their ability to do these things (e.g., Demo, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Popenoe, 1996; Rebellon, 2002; Stacey, 1996; Wilkinson, 1974).

There is some evidence that single-mothers place fewer maturity demands on their children, engage in less monitoring, and use less effective disciplinary strategies than families with two parents (e.g., Simons, Simons, & Wallace, 2004). Moreover, some research also lends support to the idea that compared to children from intact families, children living in single-parent families participate in more delinquency (e.g., Dornbusch et al., 1985; Juby & Farrington, 2001; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Simons & Chao, 1996), have lower educational achievement, and demonstrate poorer overall adjustment as adults (e.g., Acock & Kiecolt, 1989; Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Loh, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; J. Rankin & Kern, 1994; Wells & Rankin, 1991). The relationship between family structure and

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delinquency appears to be particularly significant when official data is used rather than self-report measures and for certain types of conduct problems, such as status offending (e.g., Free, 1991; Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1958; J. Rankin & Kern, 1994; Rosen & Neilson, 1982; Van Voorhis, Cullen, Mathers, & Chenoweth Garner, 1988; Wells & Rankin, 1991).

Despite a number of studies on the topic, several issues regarding the relationship between family structure and delinquent behavior remain unresolved. One underlying concern is the conceptualization of the single-parent household and the role that family processes and social structure may have on tempering its relationship with delinquency. Prior research, for example, has often characterized the single-parent home in simplistic terms by using the traditional methodological practice of collapsing all single-parent households into a single category (i.e., non-intact or broken homes). Treating all single-parent families as theoretically and empirically equivalent is problematic, however, for several reasons. Most important, it ignores differences that might exist between households that experience divorce, death, or no marriage, especially in terms of family bonds and resources that may condition involvement in delinquency relative to one another and to intact households (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Juby & Farrington, 2001; Sprey, 1967; Wells & Rankin, 1991).¹

The present research attempted to address this weakness of the existing literature by using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to examine in greater detail the extent to which family type, family process variables, and economic factors impact participation in nonserious and serious delinquency. More specific, the study considered whether differences existed in the relationship *between* family types (i.e., intact, divorce, death, or never married) and delinquency, and if this association was mediated by family processes (i.e., attachment, supervision, and control) and/or economic variables (i.e., membership in the underclass and maternal employment status).

Theoretical background

A number of theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the relationship between family structure and a variety of youth outcomes, including delinquency.² Following earlier research, the present article refers to four of these paradigms as social control theory, the social control/parental absence model (see Amato & Keith, 1991; Demuth & Brown, 2004), the family crisis model (see Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; Chen & Kaplan,

1997; Felner, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1981; Wells & Rankin, 1986), and the economic strain model (see Amato & Keith, 1991; Biblarz & Raftery, 1999). Each framework provides insight on how family type, family processes, and structural factors contribute to, or increase the opportunity for, juvenile delinquency.

Social control theory

Within the delinquency literature, Hirschi's (1969) social control theory is one theoretical perspective used to examine the association between family structure and delinquent behavior (Rebellon, 2002; Simons et al., 2004). Simply stated, his version of social bonding theory contends that individuals participate in delinquency because they lack strong affective attachments to parents, stakes in conformity, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in conventional norms. It is important to note that Hirschi (1969) originally argued attachment between parent and child is paramount and that the strength of this relationship is the *most* important factor in deterring delinquent behavior. In other words, it is the *quality*, and not the quantity, of bonds that determines delinquency. Accordingly, a child in a single-parent household who has a strong attachment to his or her custodial parent is expected to evidence less delinquency than a child in a two-parent household who has weak attachments to both parents. If this interpretation of Hirschi's original formulation of social control theory is correct, then whatever impact family composition may have on delinquency should be reduced or even eliminated once quality of attachment between parent and child is taken into account.

Social control/parental absence model

Hirschi later revised his original position that single parenting may be just as effective in producing positive child outcomes as dual-parenting (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Instead, he suggested that parental absence does present significant problems that are rarely resolved by increased attachment. This argument was made because high levels of attachment between a parent and child were thought to be difficult to maintain in the absence of the other parent. Other scholars within the social control perspective echoed this position and suggested that many single-parent households are, by nature, a social setting that hampers the establishment of bonds to conformity because half of the parental unit is absent and unable to provide proper control, supervision, and socialization of the child (e.g., Rebellon, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

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