



## The contextual nature of the family structure/delinquency relationship

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

It is well established that growing up in a nontraditional family represents a risk factor for delinquent behavior; however, the understanding of whether this effect is universal remains imperfect. The present study examined whether the link between nontraditional family structure and delinquency varies according to six distinct circumstances: gender, race, age, SES, family size, and place of residence. Regression analysis of a nationally representative sample of adolescents between the ages of twelve and seventeen ( $n = 3,499$ ) suggests that gender, race, SES, and place of residence *do not* condition the family structure/delinquency relationship. Significant interactions, however, were discovered with respect to age and family size. Generally, living in a nontraditional family is more criminogenic for older adolescents, and for those from larger families. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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### Introduction

It is well known that children raised in traditional, two-parent families experience a lower risk of delinquency than children from alternative family types (Free, 1991; Wells & Rankin, 1991); however, there is little agreement regarding whether factors like gender, race, SES, age, family size, and place of residence condition this relationship; and provided they do, what is the specific nature of the effects?

While some recent studies had shown that the negative effects of familial disruption vary according to context (Price & Kunz, 2003; Schwartz, 2006), others failed to find significant differences (Cookston, 1999; Kierkus & Baer, 2003; Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997). Moreover, when contextual effects were reported, they often varied in direction, and implied competing theoretical explanations.

For instance, while some studies discovered that familial disruption was more stigmatizing in high SES settings, and consequently was more likely to be associated with antisocial behavior (Austin, 1978; Flewelling & Bauman, 1990; Johnstone, 1978; Rosen, 1985), others found that disruption was most criminogenic in low SES families because poor single parents were less able to provide the basic necessities of life for their children (Goldstein, 1984; Touliatos & Lindholm, 1980). Similarly, while certain authors (Austin, 1978; Bachman & Peralta, 2002; Wilkinson, 1980) reported that girls were more adversely affected by familial disruption than boys (because females were more “family oriented” than males), others (Canter, 1982; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Schwartz, 2006) found that the process was more criminogenic for males. This body of literature suggested that boys experienced greater negative consequences for a variety of different

reasons. For instance, Emery, Hetherington, and DiLalla (1985); Peterson and Zill (1986); Zaslow (1988); and Hoffman and Su (1997) all suggested that while females usually responded to familial difficulties with internalizing behavior (like depression, suicide, or substance abuse), males tended to exhibit externalizing behavior (like delinquency). Finally, with respect to race, many studies found that African American youth were more resistant to the negative effects of being raised in a nontraditional family structure than White adolescents (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Ruggles, 1994). These authors reasoned that African American communities often had stronger extended family structures in place which helped mitigate the negative effects of father absence. Conversely, a meta-analysis by Price and Kunz (2003) found that the criminogenic effects of familial disruption were greatest in African American families. While these authors did not offer a theoretical explanation for this finding, others have speculated that the effects may vary according to the specific type of family structure under consideration (i.e., single parent, stepfamily, cohabitating union, etc.) or the level of involvement of nonresident parents. Specifically, Furstenberg and Harris (1993); King (1994); Thomas, Farrell, and Barnes (1996); and Wilson (1987), have all argued that involvement by nonresident fathers is generally protective against delinquency for White adolescents, but criminogenic for African American youth (because nonresident African American fathers are more likely to have criminal records and be involved in criminal activity).

The present study explored the contextual nature of the family structure/delinquency relationship using data from the National Survey of Adolescents in the United States (Kilpatrick & Saunders, 1995). Specifically, it aimed to develop a better understanding of whether six specific contextual variables condition the family structure/delinquency relationship. While it is unlikely this analysis will provide definitive resolutions to the debates presented above (as well as other contextual dilemmas), it should improve the state of knowledge in this area. Few

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studies within the family structure/delinquency literature have treated the issue of context as a central research question. Instead, gender, SES, race, and age were typically treated as peripheral control variables in analyses that focused on other research questions. In rare cases where authors did focus on the question of how and why the effects of family structure might vary according to particular circumstances (as Austin, 1978; Wilkinson, 1980 did with respect to gender, and Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (in multiple publications) have done with race), they tended to de-emphasize the effects of other plausibly relevant contextual variables. Consequently, it is unlikely that a comprehensive understanding of this issue will develop until researchers begin treating context as an important research question in its own right (one that may have important policy implications). The goal of this study was to begin this process.

### Family structure and delinquency: exploring the issue of context effects

Generally, the literature exploring interactions between gender, SES, and family structure is quite well developed. Criminologists have been interested in these issues for close to forty years (see in particular, comprehensive reviews by Free, 1991; Wells & Rankin, 1991).

Although not everyone agrees, it is generally accepted that family structure represents an important risk factor for delinquent behavior. The majority of the literature has suggested that adolescents from nontraditional families are more likely to engage in delinquency because nontraditional family structure leads to weakened family function (Adlaf & Ivis, 1997; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Rebellon, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Generally, studies found that important inhibitors of delinquency, such as parental attachment, supervision, and communication, were less likely to be present when children did not reside with both biological parents. Conversely, disrupted families were associated with key predictors of misbehavior, such as association with deviant peers, the learning of antisocial values, and delinquent opportunity (however, see dissenting findings by Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; as well as VanVoorhis, Cullen, Mathers, & Chenoweth Gardner, 1988). The present research assumed that the relationship between family structure and delinquency is non-spurious, and focused on determining whether it varied according to context.

#### Gender based interactions

Most of the research that has examined the contextual nature of the family structure/delinquency relationship has focused on gender. While some studies suggested that girls were more adversely affected by familial disruption than boys, a similar number found precisely the opposite. Moreover, much of the recent research suggested that the effect of family structure on delinquency was largely invariant to gender.

The traditional view is that familial disruption should be more criminogenic for girls (Morris, 1964; Toby, 1957). This assertion is based on the assumption that girls have always been more family-oriented than boys (Andrew, 1976; Austin, 1978; Morris, 1964; Offord, 1982; Toby, 1957; Wilkinson, 1980). Hence, when something “goes wrong” with the family, the primary force inhibiting delinquent development (parental attachment) is removed for girls. This interaction may also be explained in the context of power-control theory (Hagan, 1989). Bates, Bader, and Mencken (2003) speculated that familial disruption exerted a complex indirect effect on delinquency through relational control, instrumental control, risk perception, and supervision, and that these variables were influenced by the interactive effect of gender and family structure.

A number of studies have provided empirical support for these hypotheses; however, six were either seriously dated and/or raised substantial methodological concerns (Andrew, 1976; Biron & LeBlanc, 1977; Datesman & Scarpitti, 1975; Offord, 1982; Pulkkinen, 1983; Steinberg, 1987).<sup>1</sup> A further three studies that showed greater criminogenic effects on females were methodologically stronger, and

hence were reviewed in greater detail. Austin (1978) reported that father absence was a significant predictor of only one of four types of delinquent behavior in his male sample, but was associated with all four outcome measures for females. Similarly, Wilkinson (1980) found that the family structure/delinquency relationship was strongest in just one case in the female sample, but for three outcome variables in her male sample. More recently, Bachman and Peralta (2002) showed that girls who lived with two parents were less likely to be violent than those living in alternative family structures; however, the family structure coefficient was insignificant in the male sample.

In contrast to these findings, several explanations have been developed which suggest that the negative influence of nontraditional family structure may be greater for males. The best known is the “opposite parent hypothesis” which proposed that a single parent could not provide a complete socialization experience for an opposite sex child (Peterson & Zill, 1986; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Zaslow, 1988). Some authors also speculated that parents who had gone through difficult separations may have harbored latent hostility toward anyone of the opposite sex, including their children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Zaslow, 1988). Given that nontraditional families were more likely to be headed by female parents, it was hypothesized that nontraditional family structure was generally more criminogenic for boys (Dornbusch et al., 1985). Alternatively, some authors used the “externalization hypothesis” to account for why familial disruption was more criminogenic for males. This literature suggested that males were more likely to react to stressful situations (like familial disruption) with externalizing behavior (e.g., delinquency) while females were more likely to respond with internalizing behavior (e.g., depression, substance use, and other self-destructive action) (Emery et al., 1985; Hoffman & Su, 1997; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Zaslow, 1988). Finally, Johnson (1986) argued that stepparent families were particularly criminogenic for male children.

A series of studies provided empirical support for the hypothesis that familial disruption was most criminogenic for boys (Canter, 1982; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Most recently, Schwartz (2006), using macro level data from 1,618 American counties, found that for each 1 percent increase in the proportion of female-headed households, there was an 11 percent increase in the female homicide rate, and a 25 percent increase in the male homicide rate, a difference that was statistically and substantively significant.

A third group of studies suggested that gender and family structure did not interact with one another at a statistically significant level. The general findings were that family structure was strongly associated with many different types of delinquency; but there was no evidence of gender interactions (Adlaf & Ivis, 1997; Cookston, 1999; Flewelling & Bauman, 1990; Kierkus & Baer, 2003; Rankin, 1983; Sokol-Katz et al., 1997).

Theoretically, one can explain these findings by arguing that the mechanisms leading to delinquent behavior are similar for boys and girls (Kierkus, 2003; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Schwartz, 2006; Smith & Paternoster, 1987) or that certain factors operate in opposite directions, and cancel one another out. It is also possible that the key predictors of female delinquency have recently changed (Adler, 1975; Austin, 1982; Bates et al., 2003; R. J. Berger, 1989; Hagan, 1989). Thus, even if it was true that the criminogenic effects of familial disruption once varied by gender, this may no longer be the case.

#### SES interactions

A considerable amount of empirical work has also been done concerning socioeconomic status (SES). Most studies suggested that high SES nontraditional families were more criminogenic; however, two classic studies by Touliatos and Lindholm (1980), and Goldstein (1984), as well as a more recent analysis by Hay, Forston, Hollist, Altheimer, and Schaible (2006), disputed these findings. Moreover, Kierkus and Baer (2003) found negligible evidence that the family structure/delinquency relationship varied according to SES.

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