



## Predictors of late adolescent delinquency: The protective role of after-school activities in low-income families

Duhita Mahatmya<sup>a,\*</sup>, Brenda Lohman<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 2330 Palmer, HDFS, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 2356 Palmer, HDFS, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 10 December 2010

Received in revised form 7 March 2011

Accepted 9 March 2011

Available online 13 March 2011

#### Keywords:

Delinquency

Maternal employment

Welfare

After-school activities

Three-City Study

### ABSTRACT

Research suggests an important link between maternal welfare and employment, lack of after-school care, and a child's propensity to engage in increased levels of delinquency. Indeed, with welfare reform, many disadvantaged families, typically single-mother households, face increased pressures to move off of welfare and into employment or risk losing their benefits, which decreases the mother's ability to provide adequate after-school care and supervision. Using longitudinal data from *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*, this study assessed how changes in maternal welfare and employment status, as well as participation in after-school activities influence rates of adolescents' delinquency 4 years later. Results show that early and increased participation in after-school activities served as a protective factor against late adolescent delinquency during a mother's transition off of welfare. Youth who increased their after-school activity participation from early to late adolescence had lower rates of delinquency at wave 3. Policy implications are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

During adolescence, youth and their families experience a confluence of transitions that may increase threats to the well-being of the adolescent (Compas & Reeslund, 2010; Gennetian et al., 2002; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003). For low-income youth specifically, the biological, cognitive and social transitions of adolescence may coincide with maternal transitions in welfare, employment or education status (Morris, Duncan, & Clark-Kauffman, 2004). Together, these transitions may act as risk factors for negative outcomes (Compas & Reeslund, 2010) such as delinquency. Indeed, research has found that adolescents who experienced economic hardship are at-risk for social and emotional problems with the amount of poverty-related stress directly and positively related to internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Gutman, McLoyd & Tokoyawam, 2005; Wadsworth & Berger, 2006). Moreover, exposure to persistent stressors, such as living in poverty, can lead to an acceleration of delinquency and that for low-income youth, delinquency may be a way to cope with stressful events (D'Imperio, Dubow, & Ippolito, 2000; Hoffmann & Cerbone, 1999; Larson, 2006). As such, it is important for research to not only understand the various risks for the development of delinquency in low-income adolescents, but also the potential protective factors and processes of resilience. Using a risk

and resiliency framework, this study specifically examines if and how maternal welfare and employment transitions are risk factors to adolescent delinquency, and how after-school involvement can act as a protective factor.

Involvement in after-school activities is an important factor to consider as adolescents in low-income, urban settings are more likely to engage in self-care, which may not necessarily be developmentally conducive (Lopoo, 2007). Self-care is defined as the lack of supervision during the after-school hours and may be compounded with a lack of access to structured youth programs (Coley, Morris, & Hernandez, 2004; Perkins et al., 2007; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Vandell, Pierce, & Dadisman, 2005). Extant research has found that adolescents who are involved in after-school activities and similarly structured youth programs, show several positive outcomes such as increased academic performance and self-esteem (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Kosutic, 2007; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Holland & Andre, 1987; Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999; Pierce & Shields, 1998; Posner & Vandell, 1994) and, of particular interest in this study, decreased delinquent behaviors (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Therefore, the non-school hours have the potential to promote positive peer group interactions, socialization and the development of several competencies (Barber et al., 2001; Coley et al., 2004; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2002; Holland & Andre, 1987; Larson, Gillman, & Richards, 1997; Raymore, Barber, & Eccles, 2001). And these opportunities may bear particular significance for low-income urban youth given their limited access to such activities (Coley et al., 2004; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 515 294 6230; fax: +1 515 294 2502.

E-mail addresses: [dmaha@iastate.edu](mailto:dmaha@iastate.edu) (D. Mahatmya), [blohman@iastate.edu](mailto:blohman@iastate.edu) (B. Lohman).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 515 294 6230; fax: +1 515 294 2502.

Indeed, research has suggested an important link between maternal employment, lack of after-school care, and an adolescent's propensity to engage in increased levels of delinquency (Anderson et al., 2007; Coley et al., 2004). With welfare reform, many disadvantaged families, typically single-mother households, face increased pressures to move off of welfare and into employment or risk losing their benefits. This transition presents an added stressor to both the mother and the child, with reports that an increase in maternal employment amplifies rates of delinquent behavior in adolescents, particularly when time in organized or structured activities decreases or is absent (Gennetian et al., 2002; Huston, 2002; Lopoo, 2007; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Thus, the aim of this study was to use longitudinal panel data to assess how changes in maternal welfare and employment status as well as changes in participation in after-school activities influence rates of adolescent delinquency 4 years later.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The biological, cognitive, and social transitions that low-income adolescents and their families face and the stressors of living in poverty increase threats to the adolescent's and the family's well-being. As such, it is imperative for research to clarify the risk factors, protective factors, and the processes of resilience for this particular population. To that end, a risk and resiliency perspective and positive youth development framework were employed to examine the processes associated with late adolescent delinquency in a sample of low-income, urban, minority youth (Compas & Reeslund, 2010; Rutter, 1987; Small & Luster, 1994).

First, in this study, the main risk factors to late adolescent delinquency were defined as the transitions in mother's welfare and employment status. Results from research investigating the effects of welfare reform on adolescent outcomes have found that while the transition to work can increase maternal and family processes and resources (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994), being on welfare (Lohman, Pittman, Coley, & Chase-Lansdale, 2004), transitioning onto welfare (Coley et al., 2007) and maternal employment have been found to increase adolescent delinquent behaviors (Gennetian et al., 2002; Huston, 2002; Kalil & Dunifon, 2007; Montemayer & Clayton, 1983; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003). The reason being that disruptions in the mother's welfare or employment status may increase parental stress, poor parenting practices, and decrease parental monitoring (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003), which have been shown to contribute to negative adolescent outcomes (Appleyard, Egeland, Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Clark-Kauffman, Duncan, & Morris, 2003; Conger et al., 1994).

However, there is also a body of literature that has found that maternal welfare transitions (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Kalil & Dunifon, 2007) or employment transitions (Coley et al., 2007) do not have significant effects on the adolescents' delinquent behaviors. Kalil and Dunifon (2007) also found that maternal employment was negatively related to the child's problem behaviors. Given these disparate findings in the previous literature, this study provides a continued examination of the effect of maternal welfare and employment transitions on adolescent delinquency.

Additionally, the majority of these aforementioned studies failed to include adolescents' own behaviors in determining the relationship between maternal welfare and employment and adolescent outcomes. Indeed, the discussion in most of the studies investigating the influence of maternal welfare and employment on adolescent outcomes is limited to program or household level factors such as: the mother's use of and participation in public assistance programs over time (e.g. Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2004); the mother's human capital, which includes her level of education and physical and mental health (e.g. Coley et al., 2007; Kalil & Dunifon, 2007; Lohman et al., 2004); and the economic, built, and social family

environment (e.g. Kalil & Dunifon, 2007; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003; Morris et al., 2004). Not much attention is given to qualities of the adolescent outside of basic demographics.

Adolescent characteristics must be considered given that during adolescence, youth begin to spend more time away from home and individuate away from the family. Furthermore, a main principle of positive youth development is that adolescents can be resources to their contexts and to their own well-being. As such, in this study, the adolescents' own behaviors, specifically their involvement in after-school activities over time, were identified as protective factors against adolescent delinquency in the context of the maternal risk factors. Indeed, extant research on positive youth development has found that early and longitudinal participation in structured activities, such as after-school clubs or community places, benefits adolescents by acting as an independent context for healthy exploration and interactions (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). The timing of involvement is a particularly important consideration. In their comprehensive review of the influence of extracurricular activities on adolescent development, Feldman and Matjasko (2005) noted that the literature consistently showed that early participation during adolescence was a predictor for continued participation and successful transitions into adulthood. This suggests that getting youth involved as early as possible would reap the most benefits. Furthermore, after-school activities that are more structured give youth an opportunity to spend time in supervised settings, enrichment lessons, and with adults who can act as positive role models or mentors (Posner & Vandell, 1994). For low-income adolescents especially, these positive interactions can help fill voids at home due to a mother's employment (Clark-Kauffman et al., 2003; Lopoo, 2007; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003) and decreased parental supervision (Gennetian et al., 2002; Huston, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1994).

In addition to identifying the risk and protective factors, an important component of the risk and resiliency perspective is the resiliency process, whereby individuals display positive adaptation despite exposure to risks (Compas & Reeslund, 2010). Moreover, examining the resiliency process requires identifying and testing the interplay between risk and protective factors via mediation or moderation (Compas & Reeslund, 2010). In this study, we specifically examine the extent to which changes in adolescents' involvement in after-school activities over time moderate the influence of maternal welfare and employment transitions on late adolescent delinquency 4 years later. In this way, involvement in after-school activities is a characteristic of the adolescent that is hypothesized to be associated with positive outcomes (i.e. lowered delinquency) in the face of risk (i.e. maternal welfare and employment transitions).

Maternal distress is also included as a risk factor because the welfare research identifies it as a potential confounder in the transition experience (Coley et al., 2007). In other words, the research suggests that it is unclear if it is the transition itself or characteristics of the mothers who transition that influence adolescent outcomes (Coley et al., 2007; Kalil & Dunifon, 2007; Montemayer & Clayton, 1983). Thus in this study, mother's distress is defined by the mother's general health, mental health, and substance use and will be included as demographic covariates to control for possible selection factors that influence maternal welfare and employment experiences and adolescent outcomes.

### 1.2. Research questions

Guided by the risk and resiliency and positive youth development frameworks, the aim of this study was to assess how transitions in maternal welfare and employment status as well as changes in adolescents' involvement in after-school activities influence rates of adolescent delinquency 4 years later. Two key research questions were posed: (1) Are maternal welfare and employment transitions

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