



A longitudinal examination of predictors of delinquency: An analysis of data from the Mobile Youth Survey

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the relationships among adolescent delinquency, self-worth, peer influence, and family cohesion (i.e., maternal and paternal warmth). The longitudinal analysis identified how these relationships develop and change through adolescence. Using data from the Mobile Youth Survey, a 14-year longitudinal study of high-poverty, primarily Black American youths living in Alabama ($N = 5400$), delinquency, self-worth, and peer influence were analyzed in linear growth models. Results from these three linear growth models are presented. Findings include a significant increase in delinquency over time for the adolescents in the study and significantly lower rates of delinquency overall for females than males. Delinquency was also found to have negative relationships to both parental warmth and self-worth, with higher levels leading to decreased delinquency. Peer influence was found to have a gender effect, with males exhibiting steady rates, while females exhibit an increase in peer influence over time. Furthermore, maternal warmth and self-worth are also found to increase the rates of peer influence as well as significantly increasing self-worth.

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1. Introduction

Despite decades of research and intervention, juvenile delinquency remains a social problem in modern American culture. Studies have shown that deviant behavior in adolescence leads to an increased likelihood of adult criminal behavior (Haynie, 2001; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). The literature abounds with empirical support for several causal factors. Although early research was often limited by its cross-sectional nature and attention to few variables, more recent research has been more complex, with studies based on longitudinal data and examining variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Still, such research is in its relative infancy and additional research is needed to increase knowledge regarding the various pathways through which certain juveniles become classified as delinquent.

Although relatively little research has investigated predictors of delinquency among youths living in extreme poverty, some factors,

such as inconsistent or low levels of parental monitoring and association with deviant peers have emerged as promising for further investigation for these youths as well as youths living in other situations (Brody et al., 2006; Hoeve et al., 2009; Murphy, Brecht, Huang, & Herbeck, 2012; O'Donnell, Richards, Pearce, & Romero, 2012; Simons & Burt, 2011). In contrast, the literature on the causes and consequences of delinquent behavior among Black American adolescents is extensive. For example, peer relationships (O'Donnell et al., 2012), family structure and relationships (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001), and self-image (McMahon & Watts, 2002) have been cited as factors associated with deviant behavior in Black American adolescents, although few models have been developed to explore the *strength* of these associations.

It is likely that age, gender, and ethnicity influence how various factors, both independently and interactively, influence delinquent behaviors among adolescents (Daigle, Cullen, & Wright, 2007; Ge, Brody, Conger, Simons, & Murry, 2002; O'Donnell et al., 2012; Whaley, Hayes-Smith, & Hayes-Smith, 2010). Association with delinquent peers, for example, has been found to be a better predictor of delinquency for males than for females (Piquero, Gover, MacDonald, & Piquero, 2005). Across gender and ethnicity, the effects of relationships with parents and problem behaviors have been shown to be partially mediated by school success and time spent with friends (Pilgrim, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2006). In addition, gender differences in rates of juvenile delinquency and in factors that predict juvenile delinquency have been reported (Fagan & Wright,

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2012; Jennings, Piquero, Gover, & Pérez, 2009; Neumann, Barker, Koot, & Maughan, 2010; Snyder et al., 2008).

In this study, we use longitudinal data from the Mobile Youth Survey (Bolland, 2004) to explore the effects of self-worth, peer influence, and family cohesion on delinquency in a sample of black adolescent males and females living in extreme poverty. By focusing on strengths of associations rather than just existence of associations, the study fills a gap in the literature.

Studies of delinquency often have been framed in one or more of three criminological theories: differential association/social learning; social control/social bonding, and general strain (Cullen, Wright, & Blevins, 2006; Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2007). Research that is framed within a particular theory, however, focuses on the variables important to that theory; such research may, therefore, fail to examine the influence of other variables important to the phenomena of interest (Daigle et al., 2007). We have avoided this limitation by selecting variables that have been demonstrated to be important, rather than by attempting to test one or more theories. We call upon these theories; however, to explain the findings, building a framework that links individual choice and environmental influence.

2. Literature review

There is a consensus that deviant behavior in adolescence leads to an increased likelihood of adult criminal behavior (Haynie, 2001; Patterson et al., 1989). There are fewer consensus; however, regarding causal links to adolescent negative behavior. Although the nature of a youth's peer relationships (Clark, 2007; Haynie & Osgood, 2005), social and family environments and relationships (Church, Wharton, & Taylor, 2009), and self-image (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Giordano, 2003; Ostrowsky, 2010) have been cited as factors associated with deviant behavior in juveniles, few models have been developed to explore the strength of these associations and much of the research that has led to these conclusions has been cross-sectional.

2.1. Peer relationships

The influence of peer networks on delinquent activities among adolescents has been the focus of much research. Keijsers, Branje, Hawk, Schwartz, Frijns et al. (2012) found that an increased amount of time spent with delinquent peers increases the chance that an adolescent will engage in delinquent activities. These results are reinforced by research that finds that delinquent children seek out other delinquent children for friendship (Knecht, Snijders, Baerveldt, Steglich, & Raub, 2010). Among Black American youths, peer deviance has been shown to mediate the effects of parental monitoring, especially among females (O'Donnell, Richards, Pearce, & Romero, 2012).

2.2. Family structure and relationships

Research supports the connection between deviant behavior and family factors, such as family stability, poverty, and the availability of resources (Church et al., 2009; Farrington et al., 2001; Feldman & Gehring, 1988; Gove & Crutchfield, 1982; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). A number of researchers have focused on how family structure and family relationships affect juvenile delinquency, and some have found that family factors play a role in peer relations as well (Deutsch, Crockett, Wolff, & Russell, 2012). For example, family strain in early life can prepare juveniles to enter deviant peer groups, and these peer groups are where youths are first exposed to antisocial behaviors and substance use (Beg, Casey, & Saunders, 2007; Patterson et al., 1989).

Beg et al. (2007) research indicates that strong family cohesion might protect adolescents from the influence of deviant peers, particularly as they transition through school and begin to form their self-image in relation to their peers. Deutsch et al.'s (2012) research supports the influence of parental control on peer relationships and deviance. The critical role

the family plays in juvenile delinquency has been said to be the single most replicated finding in the juvenile deviance literature (Gove & Crutchfield, 1982). Family influences on delinquency, however, are not limited to effects on peer relations. Snyder, Edwards, McGraw, Kilgore, and Holton (1994) point out that family relations have an effect on early childhood development and others have noted that the establishment of parent-child relations may influence the development of conduct problems (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Youths who have poor relationships with their parents, or who reside in homes where adults are poor role models for problem solving and prosocial behaviors, are more likely to turn to deviant peer groups and are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Cooper et al., 2009; Patterson et al., 1989). Patterson and colleagues argue that "disrupted parent practices are causally related to child antisocial behavior" (p. 330), suggesting that disruption to parenting practices is the variable of consequence, not family structure per se. Additional research also indicates that family structure, while important, is not as important as parenting practices (Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000).

Maternal support, for example, is among the parenting practices that have been shown to be influential in delinquency, both for African American and European American youths (Deutsch, Crockett, Wolff, & Russell, 2012). The involvement of nonresident fathers is another variable that has been shown to influence delinquency. Nonresident fathers' involvement may buffer the negative effects of living in single mother households, regardless of racial identification of the participants (Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996). The 2010 U.S. Census estimates that 49.7% of Black American children live with their mother only, and further research indicates that youths coming from two-parent households are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than those coming from one-parent households (Demuth & Brown, 2004). The Pittsburgh Youth Study, a three-wave longitudinal study of 500, predominantly Black American (53%–56%), adolescent males offers some explanation of generational offending as well as familial criminality and the prediction of future offending in young men (Farrington et al., 2001). The authors conclude that if relatives had been arrested, one could predict an adolescent's re-disposition to delinquency as well, acknowledging environmental factors, including law enforcement and court bias toward criminal families as well as genetic mechanisms (Farrington et al., 2001).

2.3. Self-worth

Relationships between self-worth and delinquent behavior are well discussed in the literature, with much attention to self-esteem and violence among delinquent youths (Church et al., 2009; Ostrowsky, 2010). Narcissism and low self-esteem, for example, may predict delinquent behavior (Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007). Among Black American youths, feelings about one's own ethnic identity can shape self-worth (McMahon & Watts, 2002). Additionally, poor parental support may influence self-worth and delinquency in Black American adolescents (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Church et al., 2009). Other developmental phenomena such as puberty, development of self, and peer influences also play a major role in self-worth (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

The adolescent delinquency literature emphasizes the importance of family, family environment, social environment, and self-worth in the development or prohibition of deviant behavior. Filling a gap in the literature base, this study, uses longitudinal data to investigate the roles of peer influences, family cohesion, and self-worth on the development of juvenile delinquency. The basis for our relational analyses is a model previously tested by Church et al. (2009). This model, shown in Fig. 1, shows the predicted relationships between delinquency, self-worth, peer influence, and family cohesion. The previous test used cross-sectional data, whereas the present analysis uses longitudinal data. The model leads us to the following three research questions:

RQ #1: How do self-worth, peer influence, and family cohesion affect delinquency over time?

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