



# The differential influence of absent and harsh fathers on juvenile delinquency



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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have identified father absence as a contributor to juvenile delinquency. Consequently, politicians and community leaders are making efforts to re-engage fathers. However, it is possible that the presence of fathers is not, in itself, a substantial protective factor and, in some cases, can even be more detrimental than father absence. Employing a diverse sample of male juvenile offenders in the U.S. (ages 13–17), the present study examined the differential effects of absent fathers and harsh fathers on delinquency. Results indicated that youth in the harsh-father group engaged in more offending behaviors and used more substances than youth in the absent-father group. This difference remained even after controlling for the mother-child relationship. Implications of these findings for future research and delinquency prevention programs are discussed.

The role of fathers in promoting their children's delinquent behaviors has been primarily examined in respect to two issues: the quality of the father-child relationship and father absence. Researchers have found that high quality father-child relationships are associated with lower rates of offending and substance use in adolescence (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Carrano, 2006; Hoeve et al., 2009; Simantov, Schoen, & Klein, 2000). The inverse is also true: in father-child relationships where the amount of hostility is high and warmth is low, offending behavior (Hoeve et al., 2009) and illicit drug use (Parker & Benson, 2004) are more prevalent. In regards to father absence, previous research suggests that youth living in single-mother homes engage in higher levels of serious delinquency and are at greater risk for incarceration than youth in dual-parent households (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). Thus, both having an absent father and having a harsh father creates a greater risk for juvenile delinquency but very little research has compared the level of risk associated with these family environments. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to examine the differential influence of absent and harsh fathers on the delinquent behavior of male juvenile offenders.

## 1. Differential influences of absent and harsh fathers

Criminological and family-divorce theories suggest ways in which both harsh fathering and paternal absence, respectively, may be associated with adolescent delinquency. According to criminology-based social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), children are less likely to be delinquent if they are bonded to a conventional figure, such as a parent. A parent-child relationship high in negative affect

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results in a weak bond, therefore this relationship would not be protective against delinquency. Adolescents who are bonded to their parents are more likely to care about their parents' expectations'. When faced with the decision to engage in delinquent acts, thinking about the response of a parent with whom they share a strong bond may prevent an adolescent from engaging in that act. The parental absence perspective from the family-divorce literature posits that father absence presents problems that are not fully resolved by a significant bond to one's mother (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 1987). All else being equal, two parents are better equipped to monitor, supervise, and respond to the behaviors of their children than single parents. Due in part to work demands, single parents have less time to partake in positive child rearing activities, such as providing affection and monitoring, which affords adolescents the time to engage in delinquent behaviors (Rebellon, 2002). Thus, both social control theory and the parental absence perspective suggest ways in which harsh and absent fathers could lead to delinquent behavior in youth but they do not clearly specify if one might be more predictive than the other.

## 2. Parent-child relationship quality and delinquency

The quality of the parent-child relationship is consistently associated with adolescent delinquency. Relationship quality is typically evaluated on two dimensions: control and support (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Support refers to parental behaviors toward the child that make the child feel comfortable and safe (Rollins & Thomas, 1979), and can include both positive and negative aspects, such as warmth, intimacy, hostility and neglect (Rohner, 2004; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). High levels of parental support are associated with lower rates of delinquency (see meta-analysis by Hoeve et al., 2009) and a decreased risk of cigarette use and alcohol consumption (Simantov et al., 2000). Research also suggests that hostility in the parent-child relationship is related to higher rates of delinquency (Hoeve et al., 2009), while low levels of support are associated with increased adolescent use of alcohol, cocaine and marijuana (Parker & Benson, 2004).

The majority of studies on parent-child relationship quality and adolescent delinquency focuses on either the mother or the parenting unit as a whole (Williams & Kelly, 2005). However, the quality of the father-child relationship may be most influential for male youth. Considering that children have a tendency to identify with the same-gender parent (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004), the connection between relationship quality and adolescent problem behaviors may be strongest within same-gender dyads. In support of this possibility, a meta-analysis of 161 published and unpublished manuscripts revealed that the father-child relationship is a stronger predictor of delinquency among male adolescents than the mother-child relationship (Hoeve et al., 2009). Further, research has also documented that the quality of the father-child relationship is predictive of offending behavior and substance use above and beyond maternal involvement (Gony & van Dulmen, 2010; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). For example, Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2006) investigated the relation between the father-child relationship and the risk of first delinquent activity and substance use among adolescents living in intact families. The researchers found the risk of first delinquent behavior is lower for adolescents with more positive father-child relationships, controlling for the mother-child relationship. Moreover, the influence of the father-child relationship was strongest for male adolescents.

## 3. Paternal absence and delinquency

When studying father absence, it is important to consider that there may be a continuum of father involvement. Paternal absence is often considered synonymous with living in a single-parent, non-intact, non-nuclear, or mother-headed family. Nonresident fathers, or biological fathers living outside of the home, are often classified as absent fathers irrespective of their level of contact with their children (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Mack, Leiber, Featherstone, & Monserud, 2007). Because prior research typically considers nonresident fathers as synonymous with absent fathers, we know little about youth who report no relationship *at all* with their fathers. The findings of the limited research conducted with samples that include absolute paternal absence are mixed. For example, White and Gilbreth (2001) investigated the level of paternal contact and reported that youth with good relationships with their non-custodial fathers scored significantly lower on externalizing problems than those who reported having no father-child relationship. Similarly, King and Sobolewski (2006) reported that degree of father contact (i.e., measured continuously from no contact to contact several times a week) had an association with externalizing problem and this was through responsive fathering.

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on the association between nonresident fathers and delinquency. Youth living in single-mother homes are at greater risk for incarceration and engage in more serious delinquency than youth in intact families (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). Nonresident fathers likely influence adolescent behavior by exposing youth to various risk factors. Children in single-parent households have lower family income and a greater likelihood of being poor than those in married-parent families (Sawhill & Thomas, 2005). Indeed, disparities between family income levels of single-mother households and two-parent households may largely explain the association between father absence and incarceration (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). An additional issue is the single parent's ability to provide the same level of affective support that could be given in the presence of an additional parent in the household (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This additional parent would relieve some amount of child-rearing duties and provide the original parent with the emotional and psychological support necessary to raise a child in a positive manner. Indeed, research suggests that in households in which there is only one parent, parents are more likely to exhibit indifference or hostility toward their children (Laub & Sampson, 1988).

Relatively few studies have simultaneously examined the effects of living in a single-mother household and the qualities of the father on youth behavior. Analyzing cross-sectional data from the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, and Taylor (2003) examined the association between father involvement, father's antisocial behavior, and behavioral

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