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Position Paper

The effects of single-mother and single-father families on youth crime: Examining five gender-related hypotheses

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of the concentrations of single-mother families (SMFs) and single-father families (SFFs) on youth crime. Five hypotheses, including the maternal, same-sex, equality, prevalence and economic disadvantage hypotheses were formulated at the aggregate level and tested using data from 433 Canadian municipalities. Consistent with the prevalence hypothesis, it was found that the concentration of SMFs had a much stronger conducive effect on youth crime than did the SFFs. Also, at high prevalence level, the effect of SMFs was much stronger than its effect at low prevalence level. However, the significant but relatively weak effects of low income in SMFs and SFFs on youth crime offered only limited support to the economic disadvantage hypothesis. The findings suggest that one may need to consider factors and measures that are beyond the economic or financial aspect of the single-parent families.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of single-mother and single-father families on youth crime. Five gender-specific hypotheses are formulated and tested using municipal-level data from 433 Canadian municipalities in 2006 and 2011.

1.1. The conducive effect of family disruption on youth crime: the main hypothesis

Family disruption is considered an important predictor of youth crime (see, for example, [Sampson, 1987](#)). At the aggregate level, it is often measured as the percentage of single-parent families, the proportion of divorced population, or a combination of both ([Sampson, 1987](#); [Sampson and Groves, 1989](#)). According to [Sampson \(1987\)](#), there are at least three reasons as to why family disruption may cause youth crime in the community. First, at the individual level, youth whose parents are single or divorced commit more crime. Second, single-parent and divorced families are more vulnerable and less likely to participate in community organizations, thus reducing the community's control capacity. Third, these families are also less able to monitor activities in the neighborhood and supervise local youth ([Sampson and Groves, 1989](#); [Veysey and Messner, 1999](#)). In addition, family disruption may also negatively affect local friendship networks and collective efficacy ([Sampson and Groves, 1989](#); [Sampson et al., 1997](#)). Additional explanations include weak parental attachment, low academic achievement, emotional

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problems and resource disadvantage in disrupted families (Bankston and Caldas, 1998; Beiser et al., 2002; Jang, 1997; Kierkus and Baer, 2002). In short, family disruption causes a number of problems and has negative effects on the community's formal and informal control mechanisms, social networks and collective efficacy which, in turn, cause crime and delinquency to increase.

Research studies have generally shown that the single-parent family causes youth crime to increase. Sampson (1987) analyzed city-level data and reported a criminogenic (i.e., conducive) effect of percent Black households headed by females on Black juvenile homicide rates (see also, Ousey, 2000; Shihadeh and Steffensmeier, 1994). Findings of the conducive effects of the single-parent family were also reported in other studies in terms of male and female youth homicide (Cubbin et al., 2000; Steffensmeier and Haynie, 2000) and other youth offenses including the juvenile offender rate, violent offenses, male and female property crime rates and juvenile robbery rates (Jacob, 2006; Osgood and Chambers, 2000; Ouimet, 2000; Sampson, 1986, 1987; Schulenberg et al., 2007; Shihadeh and Steffensmeier, 1994). Additional support was also obtained from a number of individual- and multi-level analyses of delinquency, youth crime and other youth problems (Anderson, 2002; Bellair and McNulty, 2005; Bernburg and Thorlindsson, 2007; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Hay et al., 2006; Haynie et al., 2006; Hoffmann, 2006; Juby and Farrington, 2001; Kierkus and Hewitt, 2009; Knoester and Haynie, 2005; Langton and Berger, 2011; Musick and Meier, 2010; Perrone et al., 2004; Price and Kunz, 2003; Rodgers and Rose, 2002; Spruijt et al., 2001; Theobald et al., 2010; Thorlindsson et al., 2012; Weijters et al., 2007).

The research evidence we have reviewed so far suggests that the concentration of single-parent families is associated with increases in youth crime. Hence, a main hypothesis is formulated. It is predicted that at the aggregate or community level, the proportion of single-parent families has a conducive effect (i.e., statistically positive effect) on youth crime. The hypothesis will be examined using a sample of 433 Canadian municipalities with 2006 data on the proportions of the single-mother family (SMF) and the single-father family (SFF) and 2011 data on female and male youth crime in terms of the rates of total, violent and property offenses.

1.2. Considering the single-mother and single-father families

A rather unique contribution of this study is the adaptation of gender-specific explanations of the relationship between single-parent families and youth crime at the aggregate or community level. Existing research has examined a number of gender-specific explanations of the effects of single-parent families on problem behaviors and delinquency at the individual or household level. That is, the effects of the single-parent family on delinquency may vary depending on the gender of the parent or the child. Yet, not much research has been done on the gender-related relationships of the variables at the aggregate or community level. Therefore, the present study examines at the municipal level five gender-related hypotheses, namely, the maternal, same-sex, equality, prevalence and economic disadvantage hypotheses (i.e., to be labeled as Hypotheses 1 to 5).

In terms of policy measures, by studying and comparing the effects of both single-mother and single-father families, one may have a more precise understanding of how the different configurations of these families may affect the community's ability to control delinquency. Another important policy implication is related to whether economic disadvantage explains the effect of single-parent families on delinquency. If that is the case, then policy measures alleviating the economic conditions of the single-parent families may help to reduce delinquency, and perhaps crime and other related problems as well. If not, then one may need to look into measures that are beyond the economic or financial aspect of the single-parent families.

2. Gender-related hypotheses

2.1. The maternal hypothesis

The maternal hypothesis suggests that the mother represents the more effective control of the child than does the father perhaps due to the mother-child bond starting at infancy, a more intimate relationship, more frequent communication and the amount of time the mother spends with the child (Eitle, 2006; Hemovich and Crano, 2009). In the situation of the child who lives with the single mother from birth but had never lived with the father, the mother represents the only stable parental figure to the child. In the situation of divorce, the maternal hypothesis suggests that the mother-child relationship is likely stronger than the father-child relationship prior to and after the divorce (Ahrons, 2011; Kunz, 2009). In terms of social control, single mothers may exert almost as much influence on their children as mothers do in two-parent families, whereas single fathers fare much worse. Therefore, living with a single mother should cause a lower level of delinquency than living with a single father.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Cookston (1999) reported that adolescents from single-father homes had the lowest level of supervision, whereas those from single-mother homes had lower rates of alcohol use, drug use and delinquency. Based on a similar data source, Demuth and Brown (2004) reported more involvement in delinquency for adolescents in SFFs than those in SMFs. With the Add Health data, Mack et al. (2007) found that maternal attachment was the most powerful predictor of delinquency. Including data from the subsequent waves of Add Health, Amato and Kane (2011) noted that adolescents living with a single parent reported lower levels of paternal warmth than maternal warmth.

Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) and reported that single-mother structure did not increase the likelihood of delinquency for African American children probably due to

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