

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado

The interplay of parental monitoring and socioeconomic status in predicting minor delinquency between and within adolescents



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 June 2016

Received in revised form 7 June 2017

Accepted 8 June 2017

Available online 30 June 2017

Keywords:

Adolescent delinquency

Parental monitoring

Socioeconomic status

Neighborhoods

Within-individual

ABSTRACT

This six-wave multi-informant longitudinal study on Dutch adolescents ($N = 824$; age 12–18) examined the interplay of socioeconomic status with parental monitoring in predicting minor delinquency. Fixed-effects negative binomial regression analyses revealed that this interplay is different within adolescents across time than between adolescents. Between individuals, parental solicitation and control were not significantly associated with delinquency after controlling for SES: Adolescents whose parents exercised more monitoring did not offend less than others. Within individuals, higher levels of parental control were unexpectedly associated with more delinquency, but this relation was dependent on SES: Low-SES adolescents, but not high-SES adolescents, offended more during periods in which their parents exercised more control than during other periods with less control. In contrast to earlier work, this finding suggests that monitoring could be least effective when needed most. Low-SES parents might not use monitoring effectively and become overcontrolling when their child goes astray.

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Parents commonly aim to prevent their adolescent offspring from engaging in risky activities. To this end, they can monitor adolescents' activities and whereabouts (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). For example, parents can ask questions and encourage their children to disclose information (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), which is known as *parental solicitation*. Parents can also demand to be informed by setting monitoring rules, which is known as *parental control*. Following up on research suggesting that

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monitoring may not be as effective as previously assumed (Racz & McMahon, 2011; Smetana, 2008; Stattin & Kerr, 2000), some more recent studies examined for whom monitoring is effective and under what circumstances. This literature indicates that whereas monitoring may be most effective when adolescents are exposed to risk factors for problem behavior, it may be ineffective or even counter effective in the absence of risk factors (e.g., Kiesner, Poulin, & Dishion, 2010; Laird, Marrero, & Sentse, 2010). This longitudinal study on Dutch adolescents (age 12–18) therefore examined the interplay of parental monitoring with arguably the most classic risk factor for problem behavior: a low socioeconomic status (Merton, 1968). Specifically, we investigated whether the association of minor delinquency with parental solicitation and control would be more beneficial for low-SES adolescents. Additionally, we examined whether this hypothesized moderation is specific for parents' monitoring efforts, or whether it also applies to adolescent disclosure of information (Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

In terms of design, this study expanded upon existing research by investigating all associations both *between adolescents* and *within adolescents*. A between-individual association means that adolescents who are monitored more, commit less offenses compared to other adolescents who are monitored less. Contrarily, a within-individual association implies that the same adolescents reveal less problem behavior during periods with more monitoring than during periods with less monitoring. Unraveling how changes in monitoring co-occur with concurrent fluctuations in delinquency may provide more relevant information for parents and practitioners, compared to studying differences between individuals (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009; Voelkle, Brose, Schmiedek, & Lindenberger, 2014).

1. Parental monitoring and adolescent delinquency

As adolescents enter middle school, they start to spend relatively more time with friends and less with their family (Larson & Richards, 1991). Consequently, parents have fewer opportunities to supervise their activities (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Among peers, many adolescents experiment with risky behaviors, such as minor delinquency and substance use (Moffitt, 1993). Parents thus have to meet the challenge to protect their children from risky behavior, while at the same time promoting their autonomy. One strategy to accomplish this balance is to monitor adolescents' activities.

The effectiveness of monitoring has been a topic of scientific debate. There are theoretical reasons to believe that monitoring may be effective in preventing problem behavior, but it can also be reasoned that it may be ineffective or even counter effective. Monitoring could be effective because it may enable parents to stay involved, without being physically present (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). To the extent that adolescents accept this involvement, it may prevent them from engaging in risky activities. Contrarily, monitoring may be ineffective because adolescents may perceive it as a form of overprotection or privacy invasion (Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008; Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009). Adolescents typically develop a growing desire for autonomy (Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 2001) and may therefore perceive their parents' monitoring efforts as a threat to their independence. In this case, monitoring may even become counter effective (Kerr & Stattin, 2000) since it may be precisely this desire for autonomy that motivates many adolescents to experiment with delinquency (Agnew, 1984). Theoretically, such harmful effects of monitoring may therefore be expected particularly for more controlling monitoring strategies (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Consequently, parental control may have a stronger potential for harmful effects than parental solicitation.

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of monitoring is mixed and varies between different monitoring strategies and research designs. Between-individual studies suggested that parental monitoring is indirectly linked to less problem behavior via more disclosure by adolescents (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Klevens & Hall, 2014; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006; Vieno, Nation, Pastore, & Santinello, 2009; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011). This suggests that parents' efforts to obtain information from children could preclude delinquency at least partly because children indeed disclose information in response. Consequently, studies that examined solicitation while controlling for disclosure typically revealed null results (Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013) or even found that solicitation was related to more problem behavior (Rekker et al., 2015; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Kiesner, Dishion, Poulin, & Pastore, 2009; Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011). Contrarily, parental control was still found to be associated with less problem behavior after controlling for disclosure in some studies (Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011), but not in other studies (Keijsers et al., 2010; Kerr et al., 2010; Kiesner et al., 2009).

In sum, although these between-individual studies suggest that monitoring is related to less problem behavior, this effect often disappeared or reversed after controlling for disclosure. By including disclosure as a control variable, many studies have essentially examined the effect of monitoring that is not accompanied by adolescent disclosure. These studies' adverse effects suggest that a situation in which parents ask more, but adolescents do not tell more, may indicate involvement in problem behavior. Potentially, parents ask more questions in these situations (e.g., solicitation) precisely because they suspect that their child may be withholding information about risky activities (e.g., lack of disclosure). If disclosure indeed mediates the beneficial effects of monitoring (e.g., Soenens et al., 2006), mainly harmful effects (e.g., due to privacy invasion) may be visible after controlling for disclosure. Therefore, we examined monitoring effects before controlling for disclosure in this study. In sum, our first hypothesis (H1) was that adolescents whose parents exercise more solicitation and control engage in less delinquent behavior than other adolescents who are monitored less (i.e., between-individual effect).

Despite this abundance of between-individual studies, little evidence is available on within-individual associations between parental monitoring and delinquency. While other aspects of parent-child relationships (e.g., parental knowledge and involvement) were found to be associated with delinquency within adolescents across time (e.g., Farrington, Loeber, Yin, & Anderson, 2002; Lam, McHale, & Crouter, 2014; Rekker et al., 2015), most studies that focused on monitoring have

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