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Childhood broken homes and adult violence: An analysis of moderators and mediators

Delphine Theobald [a], David P. Farrington [b], Alex R. Piquero [c,*]

[a] King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry, London, United Kingdom
[b] Cambridge University, Institute of Criminology, Cambridge, United Kingdom
[c] University of Texas Dallas, Program in Criminology, 800 W. Campbell Rd., GR31, Richardson, TX, 75080-3021, United States

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Children who experience a family breakdown due to the separation or divorce of their parents may be at an increased risk of violent offending especially if they have experienced a disadvantaged upbringing that included low family income, marital disharmony, or parental criminality.
Methods: Using data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, we examine the effect of experiencing a broken home on subsequent violence. We further examine possible mediators and moderators of this effect.
Results: We find that self-reported violence and hyperactivity act as possible mediators on the effect of a broken home on later violent convictions. We also find evidence for moderation of this effect by harsh discipline, nervousness, low family income, and having a young mother.
Conclusions: We discuss the findings in the context of future research and possible policy recommendations.

Introduction

Traditionally, a common theme in many criminological theories is the important role of the family in socializing children (Hirschi, 1995; Farrington, 2010). When families do not socialize their children or when families break apart, the negative effects that may emerge will involve both the adults and the children, especially if there is continued conflict between them (Thornberry et al., 1999). This breakdown can be regarded as a process with problems that emerge years before an actual separation or divorce—often beginning with one or both partners disengaging emotionally from the relationship (Amato, 2000). This disengagement can also result in conflict over emotional matters and financial issues (Booth & Amato, 1991, 2001). From the parents' point of view, the breakdown may act as a trigger for increases in their own antisocial and offending behavior (Farrington & West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995; Theobald & Farrington, 2012). Conflict between the parents can also have deleterious effects on the children where they can experience inconsistent parenting, reduced affection and warmth, and reduced supervision—all of which have been found to be predictive of later delinquency (Farrington, 1992; Rebellon, 2002).[1]

This paper examines the effect of experiencing family breakdown due to separation/divorce (up to the age of 14) by the males in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) and the effect this life event has on their subsequent violent offending. Such an investigation is relevant to extant research because of the general lack of longitudinal investigations of long-term effects of broken homes on adult functioning—especially with respect to violent criminal behavior—and may help us to understand the mechanisms involved. Before we present the results of our investigation, we first briefly review prior research on the effect of family disruption on later delinquency and offending.

Effects of marital breakdown on children's offending

With increases in family instability over the last 40 years in the UK and other westernized nations, the effect of family disruption on children has become one of the primary areas of research in criminology and other disciplines such as developmental and family psychology (Amato, 2001; Wells & Rankin, 1991). This link between broken homes and delinquency has been established over several decades using data from some important longitudinal studies (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; West & Farrington, 1973; Fergusson et al., 1986; Kolvin et al., 1988; Mednick et al., 1990; Farrington, 1992; Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996; Juby & Farrington, 2001). For example, in the Thousand Family birth cohort study of Newcastle boys, Kolvin et al. (1988) found that the percentage of boys who experienced family disruption up to the age of 5 years who were convicted up to age 32 was doubled (53%, compared with 28% of the remainder). Farrington (1992) found that disrupted families were as strong a predictor of delinquency as other major risk factors (e.g., hyperactivity, low family income, large family size, low school attainment, poor parental supervision and poor child rearing).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: apiquero@utdallas.edu (A.R. Piquero).

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More recent analyses of the Cambridge Study found that 60% of boys who were separated from a parent by their tenth birthday were convicted up to age 50, compared with 36% of the remainder (Farrington, Coid, & Murray, 2009; Farrington, Coid, & West, 2009). Juby and Farrington (2001) reported that delinquency rates were higher among the boys who had experienced a disrupted family before the age of 15 compared with those raised in an intact family, and the results were similar whether juvenile convictions, juvenile self-reported delinquency or adult convictions were studied. In a large meta-analysis, Wells and Rankin (1991) suggested that 10%–15% more of those children who experienced a broken home were prone to delinquency than those who came from intact homes. Importantly, these authors concluded that much of the research in this area, although extensive, is 'incomplete and disappointingly inconclusive' (Wells & Rankin, 1991, p. 71).

It may be that the stability of the family after divorce is an important factor. Mednick et al. (1990) found that divorce followed by changes in parent figures predicted the highest rate of offending by children (65%) compared with divorce followed by stability (42%) and no divorce (28%). It may be that the process of family breakdown is an important indicator of the outcome. Events surrounding the breakdown such as the reasons for the disruption, its timing, loss of the mother or father, as well as high conflict may be relevant (Wadsworth, 1979; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Juby & Farrington, 2001). For example, in the UK National Survey of Health and Development, Wadsworth (1979) found that disruptions caused by parental disharmony were much more harmful than those caused by parental death. Boys from broken homes caused by separation or divorce had an increased likelihood of conviction or caution up to age 21 (27%) compared to those whose homes were disrupted by the death of the mother (19%), the death of the father (14%), or those from unbroken homes (14%). If the disruption occurred between birth and the age of 4 years it was especially predictive of later delinquency, whereas the effect was not particularly criminogenic if the break occurred in adolescence.

In the Cambridge Study, Juby and Farrington (2001) found that delinquency rates were as high in intact high conflict families as in disrupted families, a finding replicated in Switzerland by Haas et al. (2004). Nevertheless, because it is very difficult to determine whether exposure to inter-parental conflict has a direct effect on later perpetrated violence or whether the family environment is just a marker for a more direct causal factor, it is necessary to examine the pathway(s) between the family environment and later violent behavior using longitudinal data to assess the factors that predict subsequent offending. This is especially important because there has been much less research into the mediating factors may help explain the relationship between broken homes and adverse outcomes (Rebellon, 2002; Wells & Rankin, 1991), especially criminal offending in middle adulthood.

On this point, evidence suggests that single parents may have difficulty in maintaining a stable family environment in which good parent–child relationships are fostered. Reinforcement of good behavior may be lacking because of issues surrounding the family break-up such as high conflict, psychological problems, and economic insecurity (i.e., low pay). Working long hours by single mothers or fathers may have a deleterious effect on the supervision of the children, which may be the single most important mediator between family structure and delinquency (Rebellon, 2002).

Mechanisms

Several criminological perspectives have been proffered about the possible mechanisms through which disrupted homes may affect delinquency. Life-course theories, such as Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded informal social control theory and Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy, focus on the damaging effect that a broken home may have on parental attachment which, in turn, may compromise effective parental socialization. Selection theories, such as Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory, argue that disrupted families produce delinquent children because of pre-existing differences from other families such as in parental conflict, criminal or antisocial parents, low family income or poor child rearing methods. Stress/trauma-focused theories, such as Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory, suggest that the breakdown of the family unit potentially leads to other stressors such as parental conflict, parental loss, and reduced economic circumstances, which produce a range of negative emotions which may then lead to antisocial behavior. Widom's (1989) cycle-of-violence theory suggests that there is a link between exposure to parental violence and victimization in early life and a child's subsequent antisocial behavior and delinquency.

Some researchers argue that disrupted homes inhibit attachment to significant others (Laub & Sampson, 1988; Rankin & Kern, 1994), as well as commitment to social norms and involvement in conventional activities (Hirschi, 1969). Others suggest that disrupted families are often riven by conflict, which has a direct effect on whether parents are able to set appropriate rules, provide proper supervision or sanction inappropriate behavior by children (Patterson, 1982; Holden & Richie, 1991). Laub and Sampson (2003) argued that informal social control has an important mediating effect on the association between broken homes and delinquency. If there is weak attachment between a parent and a child, it is probable that the parent has little interest in bringing up the child in an appropriate manner and, with little interest in their well-being, children may have little desire to please the parent. Interestingly, Laub and Sampson (2003) found that parental rejection was associated with delinquency even after controlling for parent–child attachment and parental supervision.

Most recently, biosocial and behavioral genetics research has emerged as a promising theoretical mechanism that examines the relationship between families and antisocial behavior. Two studies are worthy of note. First, Boutwell and Beaver (2010) examined the relationship between broken homes and the development of self-control (at around age 3) using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and tested whether social causation (i.e., the effect of a broken home on self-control may be environmentally mediated by factors that influence the development of self-control such as parental socialization) or self-selection (i.e., individuals select into certain environments and thus certain factors, such as parental antisocial propensity, might explain the broken home/self-control relationship) hypotheses better explained the association between broken homes and self-control (p.490). Their propensity-score based analysis showed that, while children raised in broken homes had lower self-control, after matching on relevant maternal as well as paternal measures, the relationship vanished. Thus, their findings showed that the association between broken homes and self-control may be attributable to the confounding effects of parental characteristics, thereby supporting a self-selection hypothesis (p.494).[2]

Second, Cleveland et al. (2000) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine genetic and environmental influences on children's behavior problems, measured by the Behavior Problems Index, in various compositions of family structure. They found that respondents tended to self-select into different types of family structures (including broken homes), based on their individual genetic propensities and that these same predispositions that predicted family structure also predicted problem behaviors in the children. More generally, Cleveland et al. found that genetic influences accounted for a greater proportion of the mean-level differences in behavior problems across the various family structures, while shared environmental influences accounted for slightly less of the variance of the mean-level difference in behavior problems between the family structures.

Next, we review three of the strongest mechanisms identified in the literature: dysfunctional families, low self-control, and delinquent peers.[3]