



Parental gender, single-parent families, and delinquency: Exploring the moderating influence of race/ethnicity[☆]

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Abstract

Despite the great interest in the relationship between family structure and delinquent behavior generally, very little research has explored variation within the family form of single parenting and its implications. The present study examines whether parental gender is associated with delinquent behavior and marijuana, alcohol, and other illicit drug use, and whether the magnitude of an association between parental gender and delinquency is moderated by race/ethnicity. The analyses can be interpreted as supporting either the structural or maternal hypotheses, with parental gender (namely living with a father) being found to increase the risk of alcohol use generally, while females living with their fathers are at an increased risk of being involved in delinquent behavior. The only evidence of race/ethnicity conditioning the relationship between parental gender and deviant behavior was for marijuana use—living with one's father increases the risk of Hispanic/Latino adolescents engaging in marijuana use. While these findings provide further evidence that children living with single fathers may be at an increased risk of being involved in delinquent behavior (under certain conditions), additional research is needed to further evaluate the conditional nature of the single-father–delinquency association. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The role of family structure in explaining delinquency has been a central topic of criminology for the past half century. The question of whether children who are raised in non-traditional families, including single-parent families, are at an increased risk of delinquency and drug use has been the focus of several studies (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Flewelling and Bauman, 1990; Hoffman and Johnson, 1998; Hoffman, 2002; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; McCord, 1991; Rankin and Kern, 1994; Steinberg, 1987; Warr, 1993). One major reason for the proliferation of studies examining the association between non-traditional families and delinquency is the exponential growth of single-parent and other non-traditional families in recent decades in the United States (Bianchi, 1995; Dornbusch et al., 1985). According to Teachman (2000), the percentage of children living with two parents fell dramatically across all racial groups over the past few decades (1970–1994), with the percent of White children living with two parents falling from 90 to less than 80%, the percent of black children living with two parents falling from 60 to approximately 33%, and the percent of Hispanic children living with two parents falling from 80 to 65%.

Most of these studies have uncovered similar results—being raised in a single-parent family is a risk factor for delinquency, particularly if the family is impoverished. While the arguments vary for why living in a single-parent family increases the risk for delinquency, the most popular explanation centers on a resource deprivation argument—that a single parent has fewer resources (including economic resources, time, and energy) at her/his disposal than two parents, with the assumption that fewer resources leads to diminished social control and socialization (Amato and Keith, 1991; Cohen and Felson, 1979; Hirschi, 1969; Lareau, 1989; McLanahan and Booth, 1989; McNulty and Bellair, 2003; Meyer and Garasky, 1993; Rankin and Wells, 1994; Roscigno, 1998). Furthermore, research suggests that among single-parent households, female-headed households suffer greater economic disadvantage than male-headed households (Amato, 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994) and more inconsistent levels of monitoring and discipline (McLanahan and Booth, 1989; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). This evidence suggests that single father households may be more effective at controlling child delinquency than female-headed households. However, there exists an evidence that counterbalances the aforementioned differences that advantage single father households. For instance, Ambert (1982) found that single fathers communicate less with their children than single mothers, while other evidence suggests that women are more successful at cultivating affective bonds with their children and grooming interpersonal skills than men (Chodorow, 1978; Hochchild, 1989). Further research suggests that the benefits of living with fathers (economic and discipline practices) are offset by the relative lack of interpersonal resources among fathers, resulting in roughly the same outcomes for children who live with fathers or mothers (Downey, 1994). Hence, it is not clear from prior research whether living with a single father should be expected to increase, decrease, or produce approximately the same risk of delinquency among children as living with a single mother.

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