BROKEN HOMES & CRIMINALITY: THE IMPACT OF FAMILY DISRUPTION ON CHILDREN’S DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Parental divorce, separation, and death are all dramatic events that can change the life of a child. This research examines the impact of such family disruption on changes in the delinquent behavior of juveniles. Previously collected data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) were used to test hypotheses derived from informal social control and strain theories of crime. Waves One and Two of the Add Health dataset were used to record changes in juvenile behavior, juvenile depression, parental monitoring, and closeness to parents. Juveniles who transitioned from a two-parent biological family to a single-parent biological family experience a slight increase in depression, but no significant increase in delinquency. Children who transitioned from a two-parent biological family to a two-parent alternative family experienced a decrease in parental monitoring and an increase in delinquency. The coefficients for depression and parental closeness were significant and in the expected directions. Further comparison by biological sex showed that depression is a significant and positive influence on delinquency for girls, while parental closeness is a significant and negative influence for boys.

Keywords: Juvenile delinquency, family disruption, strain theory, informal social control
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To my family and dedicated advisers – you have been a vital part of this journey, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. – AC
INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the study of the life course has become a major focus of criminology. Sampson and Laub (1993) were among the first and most influential criminologists to research the effects of life course transitions on individual criminal pathways. Essentially, life course perspectives focus on both behavioral stability and change over the course of people’s lives. Glen Elder (1998) contributed much of the initial impetus for research of developmental trajectories and changes across the life course. Much life course research has relied on longitudinal data to monitor changes in individual development over time. Elder (1998) used longitudinal methods to study children of the Great Depression and World War II. He presented four main elements of life course theory: “historical time and place, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency” (Elder 1998, 4). Within criminology, life course research has primarily focused on the effects of life events, such as marriage, imprisonment, parenthood, employment, military service, and incarceration on adult offending trajectories (Sampson & Laub 1993; Elder 1998; Petit & Western 2004; Uggen 2000; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan 2007, Staff & Uggen 2003, Sampson & Laub 1996). Understudied are the effects of adolescent life events on the promotion or inhibition of delinquency. In this project, I will be applying life course theory to the experience of family disruption in adolescence, and how it affects a juvenile’s delinquent pathway. I predict that the transition from a two biological parent household to a single-parent household will produce higher levels of delinquency. Furthermore, I will test if the mechanism for this change is reduced parental bonding and/or increased adolescent strain.
Informal Social Control

I derive two of my primary hypotheses from Sampson and Laub’s (1993) research on crime across the life course. They argue that various actors in our lives create restraints on our behavior based on the costs and benefits associated with those relationships. Informal social control involves the bonds and social capital of individuals in any given community. In the context of juvenile delinquency, one of the most significant bonds a child has is with his or her parents. Not only do your parents give you life, they help socialize you into the world and teach you how to take care of yourself. This creates a unique bond between parents and children. Bonds such as this parent-child relationship are fundamental in controlling behavior. Informal social control theory explains how bonds restrict our behavior. Family structure often forces or pressures a child to conform to the wishes of the parents. When parents see their child deviate from expectations, they implement sanctions in attempt to deter the child from further deviations. Because of the bonds associated with parental monitoring, children are likely to respond to sanctions and behave according to parental expectations. For example, this is evident in the enforcement of a curfew by one’s parents. Children who have a commitment to the relationship they share with their parents are more likely to work harder to keep the benefits provided by that relationship. A child is more likely to abide by the rules of the curfew if they are receiving benefits from the parent-child relationship; in other words, the benefits awarded to children based on their compliance with the parent’s wishes are likely to promote obedience. However, if the parents split up, whether by separation or divorce, it becomes more difficult for them to control a child’s behavior, and the bonds between the parents and the child become weaker. A child must adapt to a family transition and the weakening of bonds in their immediate family
circle. The decrease or shift in parental monitoring that occurs from family disruption leads to a change in control of the juvenile.

**Hypothesis 1:** The transition from a two-parent biological household to a single-parent household will increase juvenile delinquency due to decreased parental monitoring.

**Hypothesis 2:** A child’s feeling of closeness to his or her parents will decrease following family disruption, leading to an increase in delinquency.

Sampson and Laub’s research on informal social control is crucial to understanding the behavior of children who experience family disruption. Schroeder, Osgood, and Oghia (2010) examined the impact of non-intact families on juvenile delinquency. The focus of this research was changes in parental attachment and social control for the juveniles. Using the National Youth Survey (NYS), Schroeder et al. (2010) found that remarriage or cohabitation after a divorce leads to an increase in juvenile misbehavior. Schroeder et al. discovered that the level of attachment to parents affects how children behave after a divorce or separation, especially in regards to how a child responds to the introduction of a parent’s new partner. Adjustment to non-biological parental figures is difficult for children who originally had close relationships with both parents. Overall, however, their research did not find a significant relationship between family disruption and juvenile delinquency. Because their study only included data from the NYS, their results are limited and could be supported or rejected by further research. Another limitation to the research from Schroeder et al. is the absence of the effect of strain on juveniles who experience a family transition.
**Strain Theory**

Strain theory was a dominant explanation of crime in the 1960s, which has been expanded over the last few decades. Robert Agnew (1992) put forward general strain theory, which highlights the negative stimuli in one’s life and responses to emotions resulting from such negative events, including the use of drugs. In the context of this research, the type of strain being discussed is the “[removal or threat of removal of] positively valued stimuli that one possesses” (Agnew 1992, 50). The argument is that a child typically has a functional relationship with his or her parents, and that parent-child bond serves as a positive stimulus in the child’s life. When that relationship is removed or weakened, it creates strain for the child, ultimately leading to negative emotions such as anger, fear, hostility, and depression. These emotions are often expressed through delinquent behaviors as juveniles attempt to fill the void where those positive stimuli once existed. One of the constraints to coping with the feeling of strain is conventional social support; in other words, having people around you for emotional support (71). If children who experience family disruption have this emotional support, they will be more likely to steer away from delinquency. However, for children who do not have emotional support, which is likely to result in cases of divorce or separation, delinquency becomes a highly possible coping mechanism. It is hypothesized, then, that children who experience depression as a result of family disruption will have higher levels of delinquency. General strain will serve as an explanation for an increase in delinquency if a relationship is found between increased depression and delinquent behavior in juveniles after experiencing a divorce or separation.

**Hypothesis 3:** Children who experience depression as a result of family disruption will have higher levels of delinquency.
Brown (2006) provided a study connecting strain concepts with family disruption. She researched the impact of family transitions on children through delinquency, depression and school engagement. Using the National Study of Adolescent Health, she analyzed how a child’s well-being was affected by cohabitation with a stepfamily versus living in a single-parent home. Her analysis showed that family transitions often led to delinquent behavior and depressive symptoms; however, her research focused on the aftermath of family disruption, not family disruption itself. This study placed much emphasis on relationships established between a child’s biological parents and new paramours following a divorce. Brown’s research relates to Sampson and Laub’s theory of informal social control. A change in the number of people living in a home affects parental monitoring and the ability of parents to sanction the child’s behavior. My research will expand on Brown’s work by analyzing whether initial family disruption increases depression and leads to delinquent behavior, and whether parental monitoring and feelings of closeness following family disruption have an effect on juvenile delinquency. Additionally, I will be applying criminological theories to test similar measures to those included in Brown (2006).

**Further Research**

Juby and Farrington (2001) studied the effect of disrupted families on male delinquency in South London using the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. This longitudinal study found that boys from disrupted families were more likely to be convicted than boys from intact families. Additionally, boys from disrupted families were more likely to be self-reported delinquents. Juby and Farrington also found that delinquency was more often a product of marital disruption than parental death. This is an interesting addition to the discussion on strain, as parental death is a cause of much depression among children. Juby and Farrington offer three
explanations for the relationship between family disruption and juvenile delinquency: trauma theories, life course theories, and selection theories. Trauma theories focus on the damage done to the child as a result of family disruption and the weakening of attachment to his or her parents. Life course theory discusses family disruption and familial conflict as processes occurring over the life course. It explains the effect of family disruption as having a lasting effect over the life course. Selection theories view resulting delinquency as part of pre-existing socioeconomic differences characteristic of disrupted families. Within these three theories are intimations of the theories discussed in the current study. Trauma theory is very much a representation of the effect of strain on juvenile delinquency. Though Juby and Farrington do not reference Agnew’s theory specifically, they share a common focus on the effect of weakened relationships and increased depression as a result of strained relationships. Furthermore, life course theory as described by Juby and Farrington draws parallels to Sampson and Laub’s work on crime across the life course and the effects of life events and processes on one’s behavior.

Rebellon (2002) researched the impact of broken homes on delinquency using the National Youth Survey. In doing so, he suggested three theoretical perspectives – control, learning, and strain – to explain why broken homes may affect delinquency. To study the effect of control, Rebellon analyzed social bonding, direct control and self-control. Direct control ties into Sampson and Laub’s (1993) informal social control and Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory. Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain that children who receive inadequate parental monitoring are also not properly taught the valuable behavior of self-control. Broken homes early childhood will have a greater impact on adolescent delinquency, but broken homes occurring later in childhood will not have as much of an impact (Rebellon 2002, 108). The second perspective presented by Rebellon, the learning perspective, focuses on a child’s
association with his or her peers and the behaviors that follow. When bonds with family are weakened, a child turns to his or her peers for support, often leading to delinquent behavior as a result of peer pressure. Rebellon’s application of the strain perspective used the ideology set forth in Agnew’s (1992) General Strain Theory. He found that recent divorce/separation is connected to high levels of strain and that previous divorce/separation is related to status offending. Timing of divorce/separation appeared to have an effect on delinquency, with earlier divorce/separation having a greater impact than later divorce/separation. He also included the effect of remarriage following divorce and found that having a stepparent present in the long-term is related to violent offending. Rebellon’s work, however, does not include school attachment as a variable leading to delinquency. My research will include school attachment and use a different data set to analyze the effects of social control and strain on juvenile delinquency as found by Rebellon.

**Current Study**

Informal social control theory and the theory of general strain are major players in the realm of crime across the life course. Ultimately, the question to be answered in the present study is whether family disruption (defined for the purpose of this research as separation, death, and/or divorce) increases juvenile delinquency over time.

![Figure 1: The hypothesized relationships in the present study.](image-url)
I will investigate (1) the relationship between family disruption and changes in juvenile
delinquency, (2) the effect of parental monitoring (social control) on changes in juvenile
delinquency, (3) the effect of closeness to parents (social control) on changes in delinquency, and
(4) whether depression (general strain) resulting from family disruption explains changes in
juvenile delinquency.

DATA

To conduct this research, I will be using two waves of the National Longitudinal Survey
of Adolescent Health (hereafter referred to as Add Health). Add Health is a public-use data set
created by the University of North Carolina. The Add Health survey examined 80 high schools
and 52 middle schools in the United States to assess the condition of adolescent health and
behavior, including a focus on the effect of social environments. The schools were chosen to be
representative of the overall population of schools in the United States. This was achieved by
systematic sampling and implicit stratification methodology. Respondents and their parents were
chosen for the survey through a multistage, stratified, school-based sampling procedure. The
surveys for Wave One and Wave Two were conducted between 1994 and 1996. Waves Three
and Four will be excluded from the current research because they focus on the post-adolescent
years.

The sample used in the present study consists of juveniles who resided in two-parent
biological households at the time of the Wave One interviews (N=2371). Family disruption is
measured by the household rosters in Wave One as compared to household rosters in Wave Two.
Juveniles who remain in two-parent biological households through Wave Two of the survey will
be included in the reference category of intact families. Those juveniles who transition out of a
two-parent biological household by Wave Two of the survey are divided into two subsequent categories: two-parent stepfamily / live-in boyfriend households (alternative parents) and single-parent disrupted households. All other households will be excluded for the purposes of this study. The difference between single-parent households and two-parent biological households will be the central focus of this research. A multivariate analysis using ordinary least squares linear regression (OLS) will be conducted to test the previously-stated hypotheses.

Wave Two family structure and changes in parental monitoring, closeness to parents, and depression serve as the primary independent variables in this research. These variables will be used to predict the dependent variable, change in delinquency between Wave One and Wave Two. Change in academic grade point average will also be included in the analyses. All change scores will be constructed by subtracting the Wave One value from the Wave Two Value. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables.
Table 1. Variable Descriptions and Descriptive Statistics (N = 2371). Wave One subtracted from Wave Two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean (%)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delinquency Change</td>
<td>Sum of total delinquency for property crimes, violent crimes, and other crimes combined (minimum = -15, maximum = 10) based on delinquency scale.</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable Intact Family (ref)</td>
<td>R currently resides with both biological parents. 0 = non-intact family, 1 = intact family at Wave Two</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Parent Family</td>
<td>R currently resides with one biological parent and one alternative parent (step, live-in partner, etc.). 0 = non-alternative parent family, 1 = alternative parent at Wave Two</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent Family</td>
<td>R currently resides with one biological parent and no alternative parent. 0 = non-single parent family, 1 = single parent family at Wave Two</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression Change</td>
<td>3 = extremely depressed, 2 = depressed, 1 = somewhat depressed, 0 = not depressed</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>6.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring Change</td>
<td>R is able to make his or her own decisions: No = 0, Yes = 1</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness Change</td>
<td>R’s attachment to parent(s) based on 4 items: how close respondent feels to mother, how close respondent feels to father, how much respondent thinks mother cares about him or her, how much respondent thinks father cares about him/her.</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

*Change in Delinquency (DV)*

In order to analyze change in juvenile behavior, a delinquency scale was used to compare behavior in Wave One with behavior in Wave Two. Of the fifteen items used to measure delinquency, six were property crimes, four were violent crimes, and five were general delinquent behaviors which I have classified as “other” (see Figure 2 below). Measures of each crimes are: *never* (0), *one or two times* (1), *three or four times* (2), or *five or more times* (3). Respondents who answered *refused, don’t know, or not applicable* were excluded from the analysis. Delinquency is measured by taking the total reported delinquency of Wave One and
subtracting it from the total reported delinquency of Wave Two. As shown in Table 1, the net change in delinquency was -.45, meaning that delinquency generally decreased between Wave One and Wave Two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property Crime</th>
<th>Violent Crime</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paint graffiti</td>
<td>Get into a serious physical fight</td>
<td>Lying to parents about whereabouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately damage property</td>
<td>Hurt someone badly enough to need treatment</td>
<td>Run away from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplift</td>
<td>Use or threaten to use a weapon as intimidation</td>
<td>Drive a car without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steal something from a house or building</td>
<td>Fight in a group of friends against another group</td>
<td>Act loud, rowdy, or unruly, in a public place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steal something &lt;$50</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sell marijuana or other drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steal something &gt;$50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2:** Behaviors included in the delinquency scale of the Add Health dataset.

*Single Parent and Alternative Parent (PRIMARY IV)*

Those respondents who were no longer residing in intact families upon completion of the Wave Two survey were divided into two separate categories: single parent families and alternative parent families. Families remaining intact at Wave Two (95% of the sample -- see Table 1) will be excluded from further analysis. The new categories, single parent and alternative parent families, are a result of family disruption, whether by divorce, separation, death, or abandonment. Single parent families include any respondents who lived with only one biological parent and no paramour, step-parent, or other partner at the time of the Wave Two survey. Of the families that were intact at Wave One, 4% of them were headed by a single parent at Wave Two. Alternative parent families include children who live with one biological parent and a step-parent, live-in boyfriend or girlfriend, or other form of parental figure in the
child’s life. Of the families that were intact at Wave One, 1% of them were headed by an alternative parent couple at Wave Two.

**Parental Monitoring and Closeness**

Parental monitoring and closeness are separate measures, but both relate to the informal social control theory and are therefore analyzed together. These variables serve as potential mediators of non-intact (single parent or alternative parent) families and delinquency, meaning that they may serve as explanations for the effect of non-intact families on a child’s delinquent behavior. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their autonomy and freedom to make their own decisions within the family. Parental monitoring is determined by the number of decisions the respondent is allowed to make on his or her own; if the child responds *yes* (1), they are allowed to make the decision, while if they respond *no* (0), they are not allowed to make the decision. Respondents who *refused* (6), were a *legitimate skip* (7), answered *don’t know* (8), or answered *not applicable* (9) were excluded from the study. These responses will be averaged and monitoring will be analyzed through changes between the averages of Wave One and the averages of Wave Two. Parental closeness is measured for each biological parent by the respondent’s choice of the following options: *not at all* (1), *very little* (2), *somewhat* (3), *quite a bit* (4), *very much* (5). As shown in Table 1, parental monitoring had a net change of 0.05, meaning there was generally a slight increase in monitoring between Wave One and Wave Two. Table 1 also shows that parental closeness generally decreased, with a net change of -0.23 between Waves One and Two.

**Strain**

I will analyze strain using the feelings scale implemented by Add Health. This scale is used to assess respondents’ answers to a series of fifteen statements about their mental health and
well-being. A feelings scale consisting of nineteen questions was administered to respondents. These questions asked about various emotions and depressive behaviors the juvenile experienced. Respondents answered never or rarely (0), sometimes (1), a lot of the time (2), most of the time or all of the time (3). Data asking about positive feelings were reverse-coded (0=3, 1=2, 2=1, 3=0) to match the data observing negative feelings of depression. Those respondents who provided the responses refused (6), don’t know (8), or not applicable (9) were excluded from the data. The total depression of Wave One was subtracted from the total depression of Wave Two to account for change in depression. This resulted in a net change of 0.13, meaning that depression generally increased between the waves of the survey.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

First Difference Model

My hypotheses are all related to how changes in family structure are associated with changes in delinquency. First difference regression models are appropriate for measuring change and thus will be used to analyze the data in this study (Liker 1985). The model used in this analysis can be expressed using the equation below:

Changes in $Y$ (delinquency) are regressed on changes in the variables family type, depression, parental monitoring, parental closeness, and grades. This means that changes in delinquency should reflect changes in the independent variables. Compared to other models, the first difference regression model excludes variables that are unchanging, such as previously diagnosed psychological or behavioral disorders. This allows me to better isolate the effect of
time-varying covariates, such as family structure, parenting practices, and strain, on changes in
delinquency.

Prior to looking at changes in delinquency, I also compared the single parent and alternative parent family structures to stable intact families along my independent variables of interest with a logistic regression. This allows me to test if youth in the non-intact families are more likely to depressed or have reduced parental monitoring or closeness compared to intact families.

All analyses were performed in Stata v.12 and estimates were survey weighted to adjust for Add Health’s stratified sampling design.

RESULTS

Tables 2-3 show the results of logistic regressions of the family structure categories, which are in partial support of my predictions. The coefficient (Coef.) represents the strength and direction of the relationship between the chosen variables, and the standard error (S.E.) representing accuracy of the data is included as well. Significance in this analysis is measured at the p<.10, p< .0, p< .01, and p< .001 levels. As shown in Table 2, children who transition from living with two biological parents to living with a single biological parent experienced a slight increase in depression between Wave One and Wave Two with significance at the p<.01 level. Additionally, children living with single parents experienced increases in both parental monitoring and closeness, though these results are not statistically significant. Table 3 shows that children who transition from living with two biological parents to living with an alternative parent couple (one biological parent and his or her new partner) experienced a decrease in
depression, parental closeness, and parental monitoring, but only the parental monitoring coefficient is significant at $p<.10$.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression of Single Parenthood vs. Stable Intact Family (n=2349)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coef</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td><strong>.02</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.35</td>
<td>***.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: † $p<.10$, * $p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$.*

**Table 3. Logistic Regression of Alternative Parenthood vs. Stable Intact Family (n=2282)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coef</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
<td>† .68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness</td>
<td>-0.45</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.85</td>
<td>***.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: † $p<.10$, * $p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$.*

To test whether changes in family structure and mediators are associated with delinquency changes between Wave One and Wave Two, three separate models were run using OLS Linear Regression. Model One examines the impact of parent type on delinquency; Model Two identifies the impact of parent type, parental closeness, and parental monitoring on delinquency; and Model Three describes the impact of parent type, parental closeness, parental monitoring, and depression on delinquency. Table 4 shows the results of the three estimated models.

When examining the effect of parent type on juvenile delinquency, there is an insignificant decrease in delinquency for children of single parents in each of the three models. Children of alternative parents experience an increase in delinquency that is statistically significant across all three models. This counters my hypothesis that children who enter into
single parent households are more likely to experience an increase in delinquency based on lower levels of parental monitoring and informal social control.

In Model 2, a negative correlation between parental closeness and delinquency is found to be significant at the p<0.001 level. Model 3 shows the same relationship to be significant at the p<0.01 level. Depression is also found to be significant at the p<0.01 level in Model 3. Thus, the parental closeness and depression coefficients are significant and in the expected directions. However, introducing these variables into the analyses has little effect on the family structure coefficients.

**Table 4. OLS Linear Regression of Delinquency Change, Add Health Waves 1 & 2 (n=2371).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Parent</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.56</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² Sig.</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
<td>.008</td>
<td></td>
<td>.012</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: *p<.10, * p<.05;* *p<.01;* **p<.001.

When the results are further divided by the biological sex of the respondents, more specific findings may be extracted from the data. Table 5 shows that the relationship between depression and delinquency for girls only is statistically significant at the p<0.01 level in Model 3. Additionally, the relationship between delinquency and parental closeness is statistically significant at the p<.10 level. For boys only, Table 6 identifies a relationship between parental closeness and delinquency that is significant at the p<0.01 level in Model 2, and at the p<0.05 level in Model 3. From these results it can be deciphered that depression is a significant and
positive influence on delinquency for girls while parental closeness is a significant and negative influence on delinquency for boys.

**Table 5.** OLS Linear Regression of Delinquency Change for Girls Only (n=1251), Add Health Waves 1 & 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Parent</td>
<td>.91 †</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>1.05 †</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.19 †</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.25 ***</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.29 ***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.28 ***</td>
<td>-.01 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² Sig.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
<td>.007</td>
<td></td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: † p<.10, * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001.

**Table 6.** OLS Linear Regression of Delinquency Change for Boys Only (n=1120), Add Health Waves 1 & 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>-.63</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.66</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Parent</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Closeness</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.41 **</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.72 ***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.82 ***</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.82 ***</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² Sig.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
<td>.012</td>
<td></td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: † p<.10, * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001.

**DISCUSSION**

Of my three hypotheses, two were partially supported by the data collected. My first hypothesis, *The transition from a two-parent biological household to a single-parent household will increase juvenile delinquency due to decreased parental monitoring*, was not supported. No significant relationship was found between single parenting, parental monitoring, and
delinquency. My second hypothesis, *A child’s feeling of closeness to his or her parents will decrease following family disruption, leading to an increase in delinquency*, was partially supported by the data. For boys only, a decrease in parental closeness is associated with higher levels of delinquency. Lastly, my third hypothesis, *Children who experience depression as a result of family disruption will have higher levels of delinquency*, was partially supported by the results. Girls who are experiencing depression will have higher levels of delinquent behavior, though they are not affected by changes in parental closeness like boys are.

So why are my results different from prior research of family disruption and delinquency, particularly studies using Add Health (Brown 2006)? One explanation may be my use of the public use data rather than the full restricted use data. However, as the public use data consists of a random subsample of all Add Health respondents, it is unlikely to explain such radical differences in results. A more likely explanation lies in my first difference estimator, which controls for all unobserved between-person differences in stable traits and characteristics. Other studies rely on between-person estimators that are subject to unobserved heterogeneity bias. My results are therefore more conservative and suggest that family disruption has limited associations with changing delinquency in a one year period. Future research would benefit by comparing my results to a similar model with only lagged predictors and Wave Two outcomes.

Like all research projects, there are errors and discrepancies in this analysis. First, the secondary data is too broad to adequately get at the sources of delinquency. The focus of the Add Health survey was not the effect of family disruption on delinquent behavior and therefore, the questions are not fine-grained enough to allow elaboration in individual responses. I suggest that further research implement a data set entirely focused on family dynamics and effects of disruption by applying the theories presented in this study. This will allow questions to be
narrowly tailored to fit the suggested theories and provide more detailed information about the
topic of interest. Collecting new data from respondents will help researchers to better
corroborate or refute previous findings, especially by adding more questions about familial
relationships following disruption and emotions directly related to family issues. The questions
asked to respondents should be specifically related to the topic of family disruption to provide
for more precision in the dataset. It would be valuable to survey children of varying ages and
have a wider gap between waves of observation in the data, allowing for a better understanding
of the lasting effects of family disruption on juveniles. Another potential source of inaccuracy in
the data is the general concept that delinquency often decreases toward the end of the teenage
years (Benda & Pavlak 1983; Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990; Sampson & Laub 1993). Teenagers
are likely to begin desisting from crime as they enter into adulthood, which may be a reason why
the results of this research were not fully supportive of my hypotheses.

With these details in mind, future research should focus on actual reasons for parents
getting a divorce or separation because these processes have the potential to improve the mental
health of a juvenile. For example, if one of the biological parents is abusive, it would be more
productive for the juvenile to reside in a single-parent biological home than a two-parent
biological home in order to escape the abusive parent. Family dynamics and family structure
following disruption are also valuable variables to study in relation to juvenile behavior. The
type of parental organization following the disruption has a fundamental role in the juvenile’s
ability to cope with the new environment. A biological parent’s new partner may bring abuse or
neglect into the home causing a dramatic shift in the juvenile’s well-being and mental health.
However, if the new partner is positively involved in the child’s life, contributes to the family
financially, and is enthusiastic about being a step-parent, there is a better chance that the new parental figure will aid in the transition for the juvenile.

**CONCLUSION**

This research aims to serve as the groundwork for future crime prevention policy. Children represent a vital resource for understanding the origins of criminal behavior. The present study seeks to provide insight into proper assistance and counseling for children of family disruption. Because the results of this research have shown that the effects of family disruption have some significant associations with depression and parental closeness, there is reason to invest time and finances into providing for this group of individuals. Though the results of this research do not find that family disruption increases delinquency, its associations with other aspects of adolescent health warrant greater resource investment and research.

Children are underrepresented in crime research. This research will serve as the foundation for future crime prevention policy. Based on these results as well as previous findings, children must be represented in current and future policy initiatives in the field of criminal justice. Results showing a relationship between family disruption and juvenile delinquency will allow policy makers to focus more energy on this neglected group of children. More resources might be necessary for families facing divorce or separation, such as individual and family counseling, financial planning, and job skill training to help parents and/or children find long-term work opportunities. In many situations, families do not have the money or time to provide such resources for their children. Not having these resources available to children makes the theories of strain and social control extremely applicable. As parents lose the ability to provide for their children following a divorce, tensions within the home rise and children begin
to feel the stress of their parents overwhelm them with depression. If a single parent is forced to take on a second or third job in order to keep up with his or her finances, there will be a rapid decrease in monitoring and a child will have more independence than he or she may be ready for. Conclusions from this research may push the focus of criminal justice back in the direction of rehabilitation and treatment, seeing as some delinquent behavior may be explained through the impact of family disruption at a young age.

It is fundamental that research on juvenile delinquency continue. Life-altering events that occur during childhood and adolescence can serve as explanations for behavior into adulthood. If there is an opportunity to help children overcome stressful life events and lead healthier lives, policymakers should be the first to support it. Allowing children the freedom from the struggles they have faced in the home will give them the confidence and ability to pursue more conventional job and educational opportunities. This research is the first step at providing such opportunities for children all over the world.
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THESIS
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  Supervisor: Dr. Derek Kreager

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  Title: Summer Intern and Project Manager
  Description: Interview Penn State Alumni about their career development to create a database of alumni information to be available for student use.
  Supervisor’s Name: Melissa Doberstein

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  Schreyer Honors College Internship Grant – Summer 2011
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Omicron Delta Kappa Service Projects, 2011-2012
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, 2010
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Summer Day of Service, 2009

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