

FAMILY STRUCTURE, FAMILY PROCESSES, AND ADOLESCENT DELINQUENCY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PARENTAL ABSENCE VERSUS PARENTAL GENDER

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One third of all children are born to unmarried mothers and over one half of children will spend some time in a single-parent family. In fact, single-father families are the fastest growing family form. Using data from the 1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, the authors extend prior research that has investigated the effects of growing up in a two-parent versus single-mother family by examining adolescent delinquency in single-father families, too. This strategy helps us to identify the mechanisms through which living with a single parent increases delinquency, notably, whether the effect is predominantly a function of parental absence (i.e., one versus two parents) or parental gender (i.e., single mother versus single father). The results indicate that adolescents in single-parent families are significantly more delinquent than their counterparts residing with two biological, married parents, although these differences are reduced once the authors account for various family processes. Furthermore, family processes fully account for the higher levels of delinquency exhibited by adolescents from single-father versus single-mother families.

Keywords: *adolescence; delinquency; family*

Dramatic shifts in American families over the past few decades have considerably altered children's family living arrangements. Family structures are extremely varied today not only due to the high rate of divorce and the proliferation of complex stepfamilies, but also to increasing rates of nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation. More than one half of children will spend some time in a single-parent family (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), and most children whose parents divorce will experience parental re-

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the American Society of Criminology Conference, San Francisco, CA, November 15 to 18, 2000, and the Add Health Users Workshop, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, August 9 to 10, 2001. We thank Stephen Cernkovich, Peggy Giordano, and Joseph Rankin for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article and

JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN CRIME AND DELINQUENCY, Vol. 41 No. 1, February 2004 58-81

DOI: 10.1177/0022427803256236

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marriage. More generally, children are spending fewer years in married families (Bumpass and Lu 2000). In fact, most children can expect to experience multiple living arrangement transitions during childhood, and these transitions can be detrimental to children's well-being (Wu 1996).

Although researchers have devoted considerable attention to the impact of divorce on children and the consequences for children of growing up with a single mother (Cherlin 1992; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994) or in a stepfamily (Booth and Dunn 1994), few have examined the influence of single-father families on child outcomes, largely because national data sets have not contained sufficient numbers of cases of children in this living arrangement (exceptions include Harris, Cavanagh, and Elder 2000; Hoffman and Johnson 1998). Yet, recent estimates indicate that single-father families are the fastest growing family form and they account for about 15 percent of all single-parent families (Garasky and Meyer 1996). There has been long-standing concern about the absence of fathers in children's lives (Mintz 1998). Recent family patterns suggest that researchers must begin to investigate the converse: what are the effects of growing up with a single father (and to what extent does this family form differ from a single-mother family)? Unfortunately, we know little about the functioning of single-father families and the outcomes of children living with single fathers.

Using data from the 1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), we examine the relationship between family structure and adolescent delinquency with a particular interest in the family processes that mediate the family structure-delinquency relationship. We improve on

the Center for Family and Demographic Research for data and administrative assistance. This research is based on data from the Add Health project, a program project designed by J. Richard Udry (PI) and Peter Bearman, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to the Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with cooperative funding participation by the National Cancer Institute; the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders; the National Institute on Drug Abuse; the National Institute of General Medical Sciences; the National Institute of Mental Health; the National Institute of Nursing Research; the Office of AIDS Research, National Institute of Health (NIH); the Office of Behavior and Social Science Research, NIH; the Office of the Director, NIH; the Office of Research on Women's Health, NIH; the Office of Population Affairs, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS); the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, DHHS; the Office of Minority Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, DHHS; the Office of Minority Health, Office of Public Health and Science, DHHS; the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, DHHS; and the National Science Foundation. Persons interested in obtaining data files from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health should contact Add Health Project, Carolina Population Center, 123 West Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-3997 (email: addhealth@unc.edu).

prior research that has focused on youngsters in married couple versus single-mother families by including those living in single-father families as well. Additionally, we are able to compare these groups to those residing in mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families. This strategy provides us with a more complete understanding of the structure and functioning of single-parent families and permits us to test whether it is *parental absence* that contributes to the higher levels of delinquency characterizing adolescents in single-mother families, or whether *parental gender* in single-parent families is associated with delinquency. That is, we seek to answer the question: is it the absence of a parent in general or the absence of a father in particular that tends to contribute to higher levels of delinquency among adolescents in single-parent families relative to adolescents in two-parent families? First, we review the literature on the relationship between family structure and delinquency and discuss the similarities and differences between single-mother and single-father families. Second, we use the social control theories of Nye (1958) and Hirschi (1969) to guide our construction of hypotheses concerning the effects of parental absence versus parental gender on adolescent delinquency. Third, we describe our data and measures and present empirical results. Finally, we discuss the significance of our findings and offer suggestions for future research on the relationship between family structure and delinquency.

FAMILY STRUCTURE, FAMILY PROCESSES, AND DELINQUENCY

Research on the relationship between family structure and delinquency is not new. Seven decades ago, Shaw and McKay (1932) evaluated the significance of "broken homes" in juvenile delinquency. In a critical analysis of earlier studies (e.g., Slawson 1926; Burt 1925) that had reported almost twice the rate of broken homes among institutionalized (or delinquent) youth versus noninstitutionalized (or nondelinquent) youth, Shaw and McKay (1932) argued that the importance of broken homes per se as a causative factor in juvenile delinquency was overstated and unclear. Arguing that most prior comparisons of broken homes among delinquent and nondelinquent youth samples failed to control for other important differences such as age and nationality that might be related to both delinquency and broken homes, they concluded on the basis of a more controlled study that it was unclear whether broken homes played such an important role in delinquency. In summary, they stated

this should not be interpreted to mean that family situations are not important factors in cases of delinquent boys. If these situations are important influences

in cases of delinquency among boys, the foregoing data suggest that we must look for these influences in the more subtle aspects of family relationships rather than in the formal break in the family organization. (Shaw and McKay 1932:524)

In an individual-level analysis of noninstitutionalized boy and girls, Nye (1958) examined the influence of familial factors on delinquent behavior. It is important to note, Nye argued that family structure did not exert a direct effect on adolescent delinquency but, rather, an indirect effect through the social controls provided by family relationships. He maintained that “the *actual attitudes and relationships affecting [social] control* are considered the crucial factors, but these are found more concentrated in families with certain structures than others” (p. 34, emphasis in original). Indeed, Nye found that children from homes with a single parent exhibited higher levels of delinquency, which he argued resulted primarily from a loss of direct parental controls and decreased child-parent attachments. Notably, Nye discussed the significance of fathers in adolescent delinquency, but maintained that their influence was largely an artifact of the greater variation in attitudes and behaviors characterizing fathers versus mothers, who are a more homogeneous group (but for another interpretation, see Hirschi 1969:101).

More recent research consistently reveals that children from broken homes are more delinquent than those from intact families (Gove and Crutchfield 1982; Lamborn et al. 1991; Miller et al. 1986; Rankin and Kern 1994; Rollins and Thomas 1979; Wells and Rankin 1988). But, the effects of family structure are largely mediated by family processes, such as parental monitoring, supervision, and closeness (Van Voorhis et al. 1988). In fact, some researchers (e.g., Cernkovich and Giordano 1987; Laub and Sampson 1988; Van Voorhis et al. 1988) have found no significant effect of family structure; rather, variation in juvenile delinquency is explained by indicators of parent-child attachment and home quality. For instance, children who experience low levels of parental control and supervision are at greater risk of delinquent behavior (Nye 1958). Still, strong attachment to two parents has been found to provide a greater protective effect against delinquency than strong attachment to only one parent (Rankin and Kern 1994). More generally, children whose parents have high-conflict marriages are less well-adjusted than children living with happily married parents (Amato, Loomis, and Booth 1995).

Our understanding of the family-delinquency relationship has been limited by our reliance on the dichotomous distinction between adolescents in “broken homes” versus intact families. Very few delinquency scholars have acknowledged the diverse living arrangements of America’s children (Cernkovich and Giordano 1987, do include a third category for stepfamilies),

probably because data limitations largely have precluded an examination of this growing complexity. Moreover, the term *broken homes* has been inconsistently operationalized, sometimes being used to refer to children living with just one parent, at other times, referring to children living in families other than two biological parent families (Rankin 1983). In addition, researchers have not accounted for characteristics of the nonresidential parent-child relationship, such as involvement and closeness, which may buffer the negative effect of a nontraditional family arrangement on delinquency.

Our analysis overcomes many of these limitations by focusing on the total family context. First, we capture the diversity among single-parent families by differentiating between single-father and single-mother families. This strategy allows us to explicitly test the broken homes perspective by evaluating whether it is simply the absence of a parent (i.e., residing in a single-parent family) that is associated with higher levels of adolescent delinquency, or if the gender of the single parent (i.e., a single-mother or single-father family) influences adolescent delinquent behavior. Specifically, we not only evaluate the significance of residing in a single-parent family, but also whether adolescents residing with single mothers are more delinquent than those living in single-father families. And, in addition to comparing adolescents in single-parent and two-biological-parent married families, we also consider adolescents in stepfamilies, differentiating between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families. Second, we include measures of the presence of other adults in the household, who may exert direct or indirect controls on the adolescent, as well as household size, which is negatively associated with parental supervision and monitoring and positively related to juvenile delinquency (Nye 1958). Third, we account for the influence of family relationships both through direct (e.g., supervision) and indirect (e.g., closeness) social controls exerted by both the resident and the nonresident parents.

SINGLE-MOTHER VERSUS SINGLE-FATHER FAMILIES

Delinquency researchers have often employed simplified measures of family structure, differentiating between adolescents from “broken homes” versus intact families. Family scholars also have had difficulty examining single-father families, largely due to data limitations. Consequently, some studies have lumped together single-mother and single-father families into single-parent families (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), collapsed single-father and father-stepmother families into a single category (e.g., Biblarz and Raftery 1999), or even relied on a simple two-parent versus not two-parent family measure (Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Powell and Parcel 1997; Wojtkiewicz 1993).

Nevertheless, there has been a growing scholarly interest in the influence of fathers on their children (Booth and Crouter 1998), perhaps because we have seen a bifurcation of fathers' roles. On one hand, we have the new, "involved fathers" who are typically married to employed women. On the other, we have the "deadbeat dads" who are uninvolved and not invested in their children's lives (Furstenberg 1988). Research on fathers has focused on two topics: (1) the significance of fathers for the well-being of children residing with married parents and (2) the role of nonresident fathers in promoting child well-being. Fathers apparently make unique contributions to child well-being, even net of maternal influence (Amato 1994, 1998; Harris, Furstenberg, and Marmer 1998). And, nonresident fathers promote child well-being both through economic support and visitation (King 1994a, 1994b). These findings suggest that father involvement is a key ingredient in child well-being.

Indeed, the poorer outcomes experienced by children growing up in single-mother families are often attributed to father absence, which typically is associated with the lower levels of socioeconomic status characterizing mother-only families as well as the inconsistent levels of discipline and supervision (McLanahan and Booth 1989; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Family structure is indicative of socialization and social control as well as social capital and resources (Biblarz and Raftery 1993). The few studies to compare child well-being in single-mother versus single-father families yield mixed results. Single-father families have more economic resources than single-mother families, yet children from these two family forms perform similarly in school (Downey 1994). Economic factors are better predictors of school performance among children in single-father families, whereas interpersonal resources (e.g., parental involvement and supervision) play a larger role among children from single-mother families. There are few effects of gender of the single parent on children's self-esteem, verbal and math abilities, and relationships with peers (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur 1998). Furthermore, there is little evidence that children do better when they reside with a same-gender single parent (Powell and Downey 1997).

To our knowledge, just one study of delinquency, specifically drug and alcohol use, has included a single-father family category (Hoffman and Johnson 1998). Relative to adolescents in single-mother families, those in single-father families are significantly more likely to have used marijuana, used other illicit drugs, been drunk three or more times, and have problem alcohol or drug use in the past year. Adolescents residing in single-father or father-stepmother families appear to be most likely to exhibit these delinquent outcomes (net of controls for gender, age, race, family income, and residential mobility), although the authors did not explicitly test this contrast. Our study extends prior research on the significance of broken homes and adolescent

delinquency by distinguishing between single-mother and single-father families to determine whether the family structure effect documented by prior research is predominantly a function of parental absence or the gender of the resident parent.

SOCIAL CONTROL AND DELINQUENCY

Nye's (1958) social control theory maintains that parents influence their child's delinquency through the *direct control* of behavior through restriction, supervision, and punishment, *internalized control* through the creation of a child's conscience, and *indirect control* through the amount of affectional identification the child has with parents. Similarly, Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory posits that children are less likely to be delinquent to the extent that they are bonded to conventional parents (i.e., parents who hold values less conducive to criminality). Specifically, he argues that the bond of *attachment* (Nye's [1958] indirect and internalized controls), through the parent's psychological presence in the mind of the child, the intimacy of communication between parent and child, and the affectional identification of the child with the parent, is likely the most important family factor in controlling delinquency. Furthermore, Hirschi contends that the extent to which parents are physically (as opposed to psychologically) present is likely to have little impact on delinquency because opportunities for delinquency are plentiful and delinquency takes little time. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that direct controls such as the amount of time spent with parents have a weaker effect than indirect controls (attachment) on delinquency (e.g., Cernkovich and Giordano 1987).

Empirical tests provide support for the importance of children's attachment to parents as a protective factor against delinquent behavior (Wells and Rankin 1988; Rankin and Kern 1994). Hirschi (1969) found high correlations between boys' attachment to their mothers and to their fathers, leading him to conclude that strong ties to one parent (at least among children living in married couple families) are sufficient to protect against delinquency; there is no additive effect as a result of strong ties to both parents. Thus, Hirschi posited that family structure ought to have minimal effects on delinquency when the child is closely attached to at least one parent, all else equal. Hirschi does acknowledge that the family environment is rarely the same in two-parent and single-parent families though, particularly in terms of supervision and monitoring, suggesting that "broken homes" influence juvenile delinquency. But, as Rankin and Kern (1994) note, Hirschi (1969) failed to test for an interactive effect between maternal and paternal attachment. More recent analyses designed to evaluate the relative importance of attachment to

mothers versus fathers reveal that both are important; there are significant interactive effects of attachment to mother and father on adolescent delinquency (Rankin and Kern 1994). Delinquency is lowest among adolescents reporting strong attachments to both parents.

Consequently, we expect that parental absence will be associated with higher levels of delinquency, on average, due to fewer (or weaker) direct and indirect controls. We anticipate that this difference will hold even after controlling for a variety of child and family characteristics that are associated with family structure and delinquency. In addition, we evaluate whether the gender of the resident single parent influences delinquency. On one hand, prior research shows that single-mother families are characterized by erratic discipline and less supervision (McLanahan and Booth 1989; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). And, based on Downey's (1994) findings that these parenting processes are more important predictors of child outcomes in single-mother families than in single-father families (and the fact that such processes are related, although less so than child-parent attachment, to delinquency [Cernkovich and Giordano 1987; Wells and Rankin 1988; Rankin and Kern 1994]), we might anticipate that adolescent delinquency will be higher in single-mother than in single-father families. On the other hand, Hoffman and Johnson's (1998) findings of higher levels of alcohol and drug use among adolescents in single-father families would lead us to expect higher levels of delinquency in this family form. From this conflicting evidence, it is unclear how the gender of the parent might influence adolescent delinquency in single-parent families. Regardless, the difference likely will be reduced once we account for resident and nonresident parent direct and indirect controls.

DATA AND MEASURES

We use data from the 1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which is a nationally representative sample of more than 20,000 adolescents in grades 7 through 12. The Add Health data are designed to examine adolescent health and health behaviors. Respondents were selected using a multistage, stratified, school-based cluster sampling procedure. We examine the respondents and their parents who were selected for in-home surveys. Several oversamples were drawn, including physically disabled adolescents, African Americans from highly educated families, various ethnic groups, a genetic sample, and saturated samples from 14 schools. The core and oversamples yield 20,745 adolescent interviews. For a more detailed description of the Add Health, see Bearman, Jones, and Udry (1997).

In this article, we examine the 16,304 adolescents who are currently residing in two-biological-parent married-couple families ($n = 9,505$), single-mother families ($n = 3,792$), single-father families ($n = 525$), mother-stepfather families ($n = 2,039$), and father-stepmother families ($n = 443$). The Add Health is an ideal data set for this study as it contains a sufficiently large, national sample of adolescents in various family types, extensive measures of delinquency that range widely in seriousness, and several dimensions of family processes.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent measure of delinquency is an additive scale of 10 items representing the self-reported frequency of involvement in various delinquent activities in the past year. Frequencies for each act range from *never* (0) to *five or more times* (3) in the past 12 months. Delinquency items tap how often in the past 12 months did the adolescent: (1) deliberately damage property that did not belong to you, (2) take something from a store without paying for it, (3) hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or care from a doctor or nurse, (4) drive a car without its owner's permission, (5) steal something worth more than \$50, (6) go into a house or building to steal something, (7) use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone, (8) steal something worth less than \$50, (9) take part in a fight where a group of your friends is against another group, (10) act loud, rowdy or unruly in a public place. This scale has a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .84. Factor analyses (not shown) reveal three dimensions of offense type within the delinquency scale: petty property (items 1, 2, 8, and 10; $\alpha = .74$), serious property (items 4, 5, and 6; $\alpha = .69$), and violent offenses (items 3, 7, and 9; $\alpha = .75$). Just as past studies have found that the race gap and gender gap in delinquency may differ depending on the severity of offending (see Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981), the present study seeks to determine if family structure and family processes influence delinquency in general or only specific forms of delinquency (e.g., more common petty property offending versus less common serious violent offending). Hence, each dimension is examined separately to evaluate whether the effects of family structure vary across different classes of offense type.

Independent Variables

Family structure. Family structure is measured by five dummy categories: two-biological-parent married family (reference group), single-mother family, single-father family, mother-stepfather family, and father-stepmother family.

Direct controls. We tap direct parental controls using a three-item supervision index that gauges how often (1) the parent is at home when you leave for school, (2) the parent is at home when you return from school, and (3) the parent is at home when you go to bed. Values for each item range from *never* (0) to *always* (5). Note that for children in two-parent families, we have responses for both the resident mother and the resident father. We use the higher score for each item to construct the index. The range of scores for the index is 0 to 15.¹

A second measure of direct control is gauged using a four-item parent involvement index. The items comprising the index include measures of whether in the past four weeks the parent and child had (1) gone shopping, (2) played a sport, (3) gone to a religious service or church-related event, and/or (4) gone to a movie, play, museum, concert, or sports event. The range of scores for the index is 0 to 4. Again, for adolescents living with two biological married parents, we use the higher of the two (i.e., mother and father) scores.

A third measure of direct control is a seven-item parent monitoring index that taps the number of decisions that parents make for the child. The index includes decisions about (1) the time you must be home on weekend nights, (2) the people you hang around with, (3) what you wear, (4) how much television you watch, (5) which television programs you watch, (6) what time you go to bed on week nights, (7) what you eat. All responses are reverse coded such that a response of “no” is coded 1 and “yes” is coded 0. The range of scores for the index is 0 to 7.

Indirect controls. We tap indirect parental controls using a four-item scale of parent closeness. It includes respondents' reports on the following, ranked on five-point scales: (1) how close do you feel to your parent (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*), (2) most of the time, your parent is warm and loving to you (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), (3) you are satisfied with the way your parent and you communicate with each other (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), (4) overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your parent (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The range of scores for the scale is 4 to 20. Again, for adolescents residing in two-biological-parent married families, we use the higher score from the responses regarding closeness to mother and closeness to father. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale is .86.

Control Variables

We control for child and family factors related to family structure and adolescent delinquency. Child controls include gender of child, since boys are more delinquent on average than are girls, and boys are more likely to reside

with single fathers than single mothers (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur 1998; Powell and Downey 1997). Gender is coded 1 for males and 0 for females. Age is coded in years. We also include an age-squared variable to account for possible nonlinearity. And, we control for child's race/ethnicity, which is composed of four dummy variables: non-Hispanic White (reference category), non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic other, and Hispanic. There is evidence that minorities in single-mother families are more delinquent than their White counterparts (Matsueda and Heimer 1987).

Controls for parent characteristics also are included. Family income is coded in thousands of dollars and logged. Missing values on family income are coded at the mean and all regression models include an imputation flag. Parent education is dummy coded into four variables: less than high school, high school graduate (reference category), some college, college graduate or more. For children from married-couple families, we use the higher of mother's and father's education. Adolescents with parents who are foreign-born are coded 1 if the parent was born outside of the United States and 0 otherwise. We include a measure of household size because family size is positively associated with delinquency (Nye 1958). And, we control for the presence of another adult in the household, including a grandparent, great-grandparent, aunt, or uncle, as their presence may be indicative of greater direct or indirect controls (cf. Wells and Rankin 1983). Finally, we include two nonresident parent measures. Direct parental controls are measured using a nonresident parent involvement index, which is composed of the same items as those in the resident-parent involvement index, described above. Second, we tap indirect parental controls using a measure of nonresident parent-child closeness that gauges how close the adolescent feels to his/her biological nonresident mother or father on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not close at all*) to 5 (*extremely close*).

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

We begin by examining mean differences across the dependent, independent, and control variables for the total sample as well as by family structure. Next, we test the effect of parental absence on delinquency by estimating multivariate regression models for the full sample. Because of the large number of zeros (i.e., adolescents who did not engage in any delinquency) and the substantial positive skew in the distribution of the dependent variable, the normality assumption of ordinary-least-squares regression is violated. Indeed, normality cannot be achieved even through mathematical transformation (e.g., natural log). Therefore, negative binomial regression models are used to appropriately model delinquency in the present analysis.² All analyses are

weighted using the survey estimation procedures found in STATA to correct for cluster correlated data sampled with unequal probability of selection (Chantala 2001). The first model investigates the levels of delinquency among adolescents living in the five family forms. To evaluate the relative importance of parental absence versus parental gender, our focus is on the differences between single-mother, single-father, and two-biological-parent married families, although we include mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families for comparative purposes. The second model introduces child and parent control variables, and the third model accounts for direct and indirect parental controls. Our second series of models is analogous to the first, but only compares children in single-mother and single-father families (including mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families for comparative purposes) to evaluate whether the resident parent's gender is associated with adolescent delinquency. In these models, we also include measures of direct and indirect nonresidential parent controls. And, we investigate whether gender of the adolescent and gender of the single parent interact in their effects on delinquency as the same-gender hypothesis suggests that children residing with a same-gender single parent fare better than children residing with an opposite-gender single parent (although see Powell and Downey 1997). Supplemental analyses examine the effects of family structure, child and parent control variables, and direct and indirect parental controls on the three dimensions (i.e., petty property, serious property, and violent offenses) of delinquency severity.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (means or percentages, as appropriate) for all variables used in the analysis are shown in Table 1. Adolescents in single-father families report the highest level of delinquency, followed by those in father-stepmother and single-mother families. Delinquency levels are lowest among adolescents residing with two biological, married parents. It is important to note that the differences in adolescent delinquency that emerge across various family structures appear to be a function of differences in child and parent characteristics and family processes. As expected, adolescents living with single-father families are especially likely to be male. And, single-father families have higher family incomes than single-mother families, but lower than two-biological-parent married families and stepfamilies, supporting prior research (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Notably, levels of parental involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness are higher, on average, in two-biological-married parent families than in single-parent families. And, within the single-parent category, family process scores are

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TABLE 1: Means/Percentages for Variables Used in the Analysis

	Total Sample	Two Biological Married	Single Mother	Single Father	Mother- Stepfather	Father- Stepmother
Dependent variable						
Total delinquency	2.84	2.57	3.28	4.11	2.95	3.43
Petty property	1.62	1.54	1.71	2.18	1.66	1.98
Serious property	.28	.23	.37	.55	.27	.35
Violent	.94	.80	1.20	1.38	1.02	1.11
Child characteristics						
Male (%)	50.7	51.3	47.1	63.1	48.7	63.0
Female (%)	49.3	48.7	52.9	36.9	51.3	37.0
White (%)	68.7	74.2	50.8	71.6	71.7	78.3
Black (%)	14.4	8.2	32.9	12.9	13.3	6.7
Hispanic (%)	11.8	11.5	12.7	11.0	11.9	10.2
Other (%)	5.1	6.1	3.6	4.5	3.1	4.8
Age	15.42	15.39	15.42	15.77	15.42	15.63
Parent characteristics						
Less than high school (%)	13.7	10.5	22.1	20.7	12.6	13.3
High school (%)	31.2	28.2	37.2	35.6	33.0	33.4
Some college (%)	21.3	21.1	21.1	17.3	23.0	24.6
College and more (%)	33.8	40.2	19.6	26.4	31.4	28.7
Foreign born (%)	10.6	12.0	10.1	9.9	5.6	7.2
Family income (\$1000s)	46.32	52.47	29.72	39.46	47.13	49.56
Household size (%)	4.49	4.70	3.89	3.37	4.73	5.16
Other adult(s) present (%)	7.5	5.1	14.3	16.1	5.6	4.4
Family processes						
Parent involvement (Step) mother involvement	1.70	1.89	1.42	1.18	1.58	1.40
(Step) father involvement	—	1.51	1.42	—	1.38	.99
Parent supervision (Step) mother supervision	—	1.13	—	1.18	.85	1.11
(Step) father supervision	12.63	13.05	11.90	10.40	12.71	12.33
Parent monitoring (Step) mother closeness	—	12.18	11.90	—	12.05	11.60
(Step) father closeness	—	10.19	—	10.40	9.95	10.38
Parent monitoring	1.84	1.88	1.78	1.46	1.85	1.86
Parent closeness (Step) mother closeness	17.70	18.05	17.16	16.02	17.57	17.42
(Step) father closeness	—	17.35	17.16	—	17.12	15.17
	—	16.56	—	16.02	14.93	16.68

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

	Total Sample	Two Biological Married	Single Mother	Single Father	Mother- Stepfather	Father- Stepmother
Nonresidential parent involvement	—	—	.57	.88	.53	.72
Nonresidential parent closeness	—	—	2.55	3.44	2.51	3.13
N	16,304	9,505	3,792	525	2,039	443

consistently higher in single-mother families than in single-father families. All of these factors are likely to contribute to higher levels of delinquency among adolescents in single-mother and single-father families than in two-parent married families (or even stepfamilies).

In our first series of multivariate analyses, we test whether there are significant differences between single-mother and single-father families and two-biological-parent married families, taking into account child and parent characteristics and family processes. Model 1 of table 2 reveals that adolescents living in single-mother, single-father, and stepfamilies report significantly higher delinquency than those in two-biological-parent married families. These differences remain significant after controlling for child and parent characteristics, as shown in model 2 of table 2.

Model 3 of table 2 introduces the family process measures. The inclusion of this group of variables significantly improves the fit of the model and reduces the family structure effects on delinquency to statistical nonsignificance. Parent involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness are all negatively associated with delinquency, indicating that both direct and indirect parental controls inhibit adolescent delinquency. An analysis of coefficients in model 3 (not shown) reveals that parent closeness (1) exhibits the largest effect on delinquency second only to child gender and (2) has a considerably larger effect on delinquency than the direct controls of parent involvement, supervision, and monitoring. All of the control variables (except family income) operate in the expected directions. Males are more delinquent than females. Delinquency tends to be greater among minorities than among Whites. Parental education is negatively associated with delinquency. And, the measures of household characteristics are significantly associated with delinquency. Household size is positively related to delinquency, whereas the presence of other adults is negatively associated with

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TABLE 2: Unstandardized Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients from the Multiple Regression of Delinquency on Family Structure, Family Processes, and Control Variables for Total Sample

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Family structure			
Single mother	.246***	.263***	.075
Single father	.469***	.454***	.116
Mother-stepfather	.138**	.128**	.058
Father-stepmother	.291**	.221*	.119
Two biological Married	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Child characteristics			
Male		.479***	.546***
Female		(Ref)	(Ref)
Black		-.003	.062
Hispanic		.261***	.284***
Other		.165*	.169*
White		(Ref)	(Ref)
Age (centered)		-.026**	-.072***
Age-squared		-.027***	-.023***
Parent characteristics			
Less than high school		.044	.018
High school		(Ref)	(Ref)
Some college		.011	.009
College and more		-.079*	-.085*
Foreign born		-.178**	-.183**
Family income (logged)		.007	-.002
Missing family income		-.064	-.077
Household size		.020	.024*
Other adult(s) present		-.100	-.111*
Family processes			
Parent involvement			-.061***
Parent supervision			-.037***
Parent monitoring			-.040**
Parent closeness			-.087***
Intercept	.943***	.657***	2.835***
-2 Log L	-35,741.84	-35,386.13	-35,053.66
<i>n</i> = 16,304			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

delinquency. Contrary to our expectations, family income is not significantly associated with delinquency (but see Hoffman and Johnson 1998 for a similar pattern of results). In sum, parental absence, whether it is the mother or the father, is not associated with delinquency after taking into account differences in child and parent characteristics and family processes in the five family types.

Supplemental analyses investigate the influence of family structure on three classes of offenses: petty property, serious property, and violent. Models that include controls for child and parent characteristics as well as direct and indirect parental controls are shown in table 3. Petty property offenses do not significantly vary across family structures. Among the more serious property offenses, adolescents in single-mother families report higher levels of delinquency than do those in two-biological-parent married families. Although not statistically significant (likely because of the small number of single-father cases), adolescents in single-father families also tend to engage in similarly high levels of delinquency. For violent offenses, adolescents in single-mother, single-father, and mother-stepfather families are more delinquent than their counterparts in two-biological-parent married families.

Our next set of models, shown in table 4, evaluate the significance of gender of the single resident parent. Parental absence matters, but is the absence of a mother more detrimental than the absence of a father? The bivariate model, shown in model 1 of table 4, indicates that the gender of the single parent is significant; adolescents from single-father families are more delinquent than are those from single-mother families. In contrast, adolescents in mother-stepfather families are less delinquent than those in single-mother families, suggesting that the presence of a stepfather may curtail delinquency. These effects remain net of controls for child and parent characteristics (see model 2 of table 4). Once we account for family processes, there are no significant effects of family structure; gender of single parent is insignificant. As shown in model 3 of table 4, parental involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness are negatively associated with adolescent delinquency. In addition, nonresident parent involvement is negatively associated with delinquent behavior. The inclusion of these family processes reduces the gender of single parent effect to nonsignificance. This finding suggests that parental involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness differ in single-mother and single-father families. Indeed, the means shown in table 1 reveal that single-father families are characterized by somewhat lower levels of direct and indirect parental controls than are single-mother families. Thus, it appears that accounting for family processes results in no significant difference in the level of delinquent behavior engaged in by adolescents from single-father versus single-mother families. The higher levels of delinquency exhibited by adolescents in single-father (versus single-mother) families is largely an artifact of lower levels of direct and indirect parental controls. As noted for the full model shown in table 2, here again in table 4, parent closeness has the largest effect on delinquency (result not shown).

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TABLE 3: Unstandardized Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients from the Multiple Regressions of Three Delinquency Dimensions on Family Structure, Family Processes, and Control Variables for Total Sample

	<i>Petty Property</i>	<i>Serious Property</i>	<i>Violent</i>
Family structure			
Single mother	.039	.213**	.119*
Single father	.045	.278	.219*
Mother-stepfather	.015	.052	.149*
Father-stepmother	.101	.096	.156
Two biological married	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Child characteristics			
Male	.371***	.626***	.833***
Female	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Black	-.125*	.111	.323***
Hispanic	.230***	.431***	.344***
Other	.189*	.296	.079
White	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Age (centered)	-.072***	.006	-.091***
Age-squared	-.022***	-.064***	-.013**
Parent characteristics			
Less than high school	-.004	-.011	.055
High school	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Some college	.075*	.076	-.100
College and more	.078*	-.017	-.420***
Foreign born	-.183**	-.317*	-.144
Family income (logged)	.056*	-.051	-.083*
Missing family income	-.105*	.059	-.050
Household size	.023	.023	.021
Other adult(s) present	-.167**	-.142	-.006
Family processes			
Parent involvement	-.065***	-.071*	-.050*
Parent supervision	-.043***	-.059**	-.014
Parent monitoring	-.056***	-.051*	-.016
Parent closeness	-.089***	-.124***	-.065***
Intercept	2.321***	1.556***	1.107***
-2Log L	-2788.53	-10074.85	-20599.26
<i>n</i> = 16,304			

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Supplemental analyses examine the significance of parental gender for adolescents in single-parent families across the three dimensions of delinquency. As shown in table 5, accounting for child and parent control variables as well as direct and indirect parent and nonresident parent controls attenuates the effect of parental gender. Indeed, these models indicate that levels of petty property, serious property, and violent delinquency do not significantly differ in single-mother and single-father families.

TABLE 4: Unstandardized Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients from the Multiple Regression of Delinquency on Family Structure, Family Process, and Control Variables for Mother-Stepfather, Father-Stepmother, Single-Father and Single-Mother Families

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Family structure			
Single father	.223**	.194**	.085
Mother-stepfather	-.109*	-.131*	-.023
Father-stepmother	.044	-.023	.056
Single mother	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Child characteristics			
Male		.477***	.543***
Female		(Ref)	(Ref)
Black		-.004	.054
Hispanic		.386***	.385***
Other		.158	.171
White		(Ref)	(Ref)
Age (centered)		-.029*	-.077***
Age-squared		-.022**	-.021**
Parent characteristics			
Less than high school		.127*	.080
High school		(Ref)	(Ref)
Some college		.027	.028
College and more		-.127*	-.120*
Foreign born		-.292***	-.264***
Family income (logged)		.021	.006
Missing family income		-.113	-.113
Household size		.011	.023
Other adult(s) present		-.095	-.115
Family processes			
Parent involvement			-.078***
Parent supervision			-.040***
Parent monitoring			-.050**
Parent closeness			-.067***
Nonresident parent involvement			-.045*
Nonresident parent closeness			-.010
Intercept	1.189***	.888***	2.674***
-2Log L	-15622.55	-15462.19	-15305.63
<i>n</i> = 6,799			

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

In additional analyses (not shown), we examine whether the gender of the adolescent and the gender of the resident parent interact in their effects on delinquency. The findings indicate that the gender of the adolescent is critical; sons are more delinquent than daughters, regardless of whether the

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TABLE 5: Unstandardized Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients from the Multiple Regressions of Three Delinquency Dimensions on Family Structure, Family Process, and Control Variables for Mother-Stepfather, Father-Stepmother, Single-Father and Single-Mother Families

	<i>Petty Property</i>	<i>Serious Property</i>	<i>Violent</i>
Family structure			
Single father	.044	.122	.130
Mother-stepfather	-.025	-.107	-.007
Father-stepmother	.078	-.033	.029
Single mother	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Child characteristics			
Male	.388***	.689***	.742***
Female	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Black	-.121	.074	.288***
Hispanic	.333***	.404**	.462***
Other	.185	.438*	.015
White	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Age (centered)	-.083***	.004	-.090***
Age-squared	-.017*	-.045**	-.020**
Parent characteristics			
Less than high school	.048	.133	.115*
High school	(Ref)	(Ref)	(Ref)
Some college	.104	.035	-.094
College and more	.042	-.101	-.406***
Foreign born	-.297***	-.463*	-.168
Family income (logged)	.060	-.099	-.048
Missing family income	-.155*	.164	-.128
Household size	.016	-.004	.031
Other adult(s) present	-.149*	-.187	-.055
Family processes			
Parent involvement	-.085***	-.116*	-.057
Parent supervision	-.041***	-.078**	-.026
Parent monitoring	-.079***	-.030	-.021
Parent closeness	-.069***	-.096***	-.052***
Nonresident parent involvement	-.036	-.072	-.056*
Nonresident parent closeness	.001	-.024	-.021
Intercept	2.047***	1.808***	1.175***
-2Log L	-1195.06	-4685.98	-9520.95
<i>n</i> = 6,799			

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

resident single parent is a mother or a father. These results support those of prior research, which shows no interaction of gender of the child and gender of the single parent on children's school performance and emotional well-being (Powell and Downey 1997).

DISCUSSION

Children's living arrangements are very diverse. Increasingly, children reside outside of married families. The dramatic growth in single-parent families, particularly single-father families, motivated the present study. Now that more than one half of children spend some time in a single-parent family and about 15 percent of single-parent families are father-only families, it is imperative that we take account of the complexities of single-parent families by differentiating between single-mother and single-father family forms. Prior research has demonstrated that parental absence, also termed *broken homes*, is positively associated with adolescent delinquency, but whether the gender of the resident parent is significantly related to delinquency was heretofore unknown (Hoffman and Johnson [1998] included single-father families in their analysis of adolescent drug use but did not make comparisons with single-mother families).

We used data from the 1995 Add Health survey to compare delinquent behavior among adolescents in two-biological-parent married families, single-mother families, single-father families, mother-stepfather families, and father-stepmother families. These data gauge a wide range of delinquent acts at varying levels of seriousness. The large sample size yields a generous number of children in all five family forms, including 525 in single-father families. And, the data include multiple items measuring several dimensions of family processes, including parent involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness. Measures of family processes also are available for nonresident parents.

Our results indicate that mean levels of delinquency are highest among adolescents residing in single-father families and lowest among adolescent in two-biological-parent married families. Adolescents in single-mother and stepfamilies fall in the middle. Parental absence is not a statistically significant predictor of adolescent delinquency after taking into account differences in child and parent characteristics and family processes across the multiple family forms. Moreover, the gender of the single-parent per se appears to be of minimal or no importance as once we account for controls and family processes, there is no significant difference in delinquency between children residing with single mothers versus single fathers (or step families versus single mothers). Indeed, the greater delinquency of adolescents in single-father families is largely a function of the weaker direct and indirect controls exerted by the father. Thus, we conclude that parental absence undermines direct and indirect controls, which in turn accounts for the higher levels of delinquency among adolescents residing in single-mother and single-father

families versus two-parent-married families. Parental absence is negatively associated with involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness.

Another important finding to emerge from this study is the evidence that a stronger relationship exists between indirect social controls and delinquency than between direct social controls and delinquency. This result is consistent with past empirical research (e.g., Cernkovich and Giordano 1987), which reveals that parent-child attachments (e.g., closeness) have a much stronger effect on delinquency than do more direct controls such as supervision, restriction, and other physical controls. This finding is also consistent with Hirschi's (1969) assertion that a parent's physical presence is likely to have a smaller impact on delinquent behavior than a parent's psychological and emotional presence.

These analyses also document variability in the "delinquency gap" between adolescents in single-parent or stepfamilies and those in two-biological-parent married families. Namely, this gap is larger for more serious property and violent delinquency than for petty property delinquency. Family structure does not have a uniform relationship with delinquency; adolescents in single-parent families are especially likely to engage in more serious forms of misbehavior. Stated differently, it is evident that differences in petty delinquency across family forms are more readily explained by family processes than are differences in more serious delinquency.

In summary, our study demonstrates that parental absence is positively related to adolescent delinquency, although the influence of family structure is mediated by family processes. Among adolescents in single-parent families, levels of delinquency are higher in single-father than single-mother families, but this difference is entirely accounted for by the weaker direct and indirect controls exerted by single fathers. The high levels of delinquency characterizing adolescents in single-father families reflects the particularly low levels of involvement, supervision, monitoring, and closeness exerted by the fathers. The significance of our findings is underscored by the "delinquency gap" evidenced across severe offenses. Adolescents in single-parent (and mother-stepfather) families are especially likely to commit serious property and violent offenses, and apparently indirect and direct controls are weak mitigators of these effects (relative to those found for petty property offenses). Ultimately, it is evident from this study that strong controls are essential to preventing adolescent delinquent behavior. Parental closeness coupled with involvement, supervision, and monitoring, attenuate the effect of living in a single-parent (or step) family on delinquency. Given that a growing share of America's youth spends some time in a single-parent family, it is imperative that parents (as well as families and communities more generally) strive to provide their children with a strong balance of nurture and control to minimize delinquent behavior, particularly the more serious forms

to which adolescents in single-parent families appear to be especially susceptible.

NOTES

1. Not all adolescents in the present study have two resident parents, and thus it is not possible to consider the indirect and direct controls of each parent separately in a regression model containing both single- and two-parent families. We use the higher score of either the mother or father to represent the score of the parental unit. Although this measure does not completely reflect the possible advantages of having two parents instead of one, it does allow for a direct comparison of single- and two-parent families. Also, as shown in Table 1, children in two-parent families do gain some advantage over their single-parent family peers in that with two parents, the average parental unit score is always higher than either of the two parent scores, which is not the case in single-parent families. Still, our measures of direct and indirect parental controls likely represent an underestimate of parental control in two-parent families and thus our tests for differences between single- and two-parent families are actually conservative.

2. The negative binomial model is preferred over the Poisson regression model because the distribution of delinquency is overdispersed—that is, the standard deviation is greater than the mean (Gardner, Mulvey, and Shaw 1995).

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