

Juvenile Delinquency and Family Structure: Links to Severity and Frequency of Offending

Crystal L. Murry

Jimmy Williams, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Criminal Justice*

Randall T. Salekin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology

During the past century, significant changes in family arrangements have occurred; modern family structures vary widely and include many one-parent households as well as extended family arrangements. Differing family structures may directly impact the stability of the family home and the functioning of children and adolescents. The current study examines the relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquency through analysis of selected data obtained from Juvenile Court records of juveniles entering the system in 1996 in a county in western Alabama. Results are presented in terms of the relationship between family structure and severity of juveniles' criminal involvement and juveniles' recidivism during a one-year period.

A long history of research has linked family dysfunction with future criminal offending. In part because parents monitor and provide nurturance to children, it is thought that the loosening of bonds among family members may result in more criminal involvement. In recent years, an increase in the number of juvenile delinquents has sparked interest and concern about juvenile delinquent behaviors and the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system. Many researchers and policy makers regard juvenile delinquency as one of the world's most critical social issues (Tarolla, Wagner, Rabinowitz, & Tubman, 2002).

In most cases, delinquents have been viewed as individuals who come from less intact families, often referred to as *broken homes*. Typically, the

*Dr. Jimmy Williams is also Associate Dean of Multicultural Affairs, College of Arts and Sciences.

term *broken home* has been operationalized to mean children residing in single-parent households or any type of household other than a household in which both biological parents are present (Rankin, 1983; Geismar & Wood, 1986). In contrast, an *intact family* usually refers to a nuclear family arrangement in which both biological parents reside in the household with their biological children (Kierkus & Baer, 2002). Intact family arrangements differ from other modern-day family arrangements including single-parent arrangements, two-parent arrangements involving a step-parent, extended family member arrangements, and the adoptive/foster family arrangement (Wells & Rankin, 1986).

A classic study by Shaw and McKay (1932) examined the role of broken homes in juvenile delinquency and suggested the importance of broken homes had been overstated. These researchers noted that prior studies of delinquents from intact homes as well as delinquents from broken homes had several limitations in that researchers failed to control factors such as age and ethnicity which may also account for juvenile delinquent behaviors. In addition, the researchers stated that family situations other than intactness may also be important factors that influence delinquent behavior and thus warrant further study. This study suggested that researchers need to look for the influence of family situations beyond breaks in the organization of the family as a means of predicting juvenile delinquent behavior. Over time, researchers have questioned whether intactness of family is a primary variable relating family to juvenile delinquency. Other models of understanding families' roles in juvenile delinquency have addressed families' dysfunction.

A recent study by Demuth and Brown (2004) demonstrated that broken homes are associated with juvenile delinquency but also that family arrangements are not just a broken home issue. Specifically, the researchers found that levels of juvenile delinquency were much higher in teenagers residing with single fathers and lowest among teenagers who were part of a two-parent household. The researchers suggested that higher levels of delinquency among children residing with their fathers were due mainly to inadequate parental involvement in a teenager's life. Demuth and Brown concluded that, overall, the lack of supervision and the absence of close relationships between the teenager and his or her parents are factors that influence delinquency. Hoffman and Johnson's (1998) findings were consistent with Demuth and Brown's (2004) findings suggesting that a broken home is associated with juvenile delinquency; however, these researchers did not find any significant evidence of increased juvenile delinquency associated with which parent, father or mother, the child resided with.

In another study, by Geismar and Wood (1986), the researchers examined two types of family variables, structural and functional. They

divided the variables into several sub-categories, with structural factors including the number of people in the family, family arrangements, and the employment status of the mother; functional categories included the nature of family interactions and relationships, familial problems, parental monitoring of children, and consistency of discipline. These researchers concluded that there is a slight positive correlation between juvenile delinquency and both structural and functional variables. These researchers also suggested that residing in a positive atmosphere is likely to have positive effects on the child which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of juvenile delinquent behavior (Geismar & Wood, 1986).

Other Theories of Delinquency

Other researchers have found that many family characteristics and family environments influence juvenile delinquent behavior, for example, the number of people in a family, inconsistent parenting, familial problems, child neglect, and the children's attachment to parents (Derzon & Lipsey, 2000; Hirschi, 1969; Wasserman & Seracini, 2001; West & Farrington, 1973). Thornberry (1987) suggests that children's attachment to their parents influences youths more when they are younger primarily because children, as opposed to teenagers, are monitored more closely.

According to social reaction theory, society is primarily responsible for juveniles exhibiting delinquent behaviors. Rules are set up by the members of a society, and those individuals establish what is considered the norm. Violators of the norm are labeled deviant or abnormal. The ways in which society chooses to deal with violators of the norms influence whether or not juveniles exposed to the juvenile justice system will be more prone to being chronic offenders (Mahoney, 1974).

Family Models

Changes in family arrangements emerge for a wealth of reasons including separations, divorces, sudden death of a parent, unemployment, and sequelae of substance abuse (Demuth & Brown, 2004). Currently, at least five different family arrangements are recognized in the research literature. These include two-parent arrangements, single-parent arrangements, extended family member arrangements, adoptive/foster family arrangements, and other family arrangements. In the first family arrangement, the two-parent family arrangement, two parents in the household are responsible for the children. This arrangement includes intact families, that is, those with both biological parents in the household; however, this can also include a step-parent residing in the household (Wells & Rankin,

1986). A second family arrangement is the single-parent family arrangement, which consists of a household that has only one biological parent, either the mother or father (Wells & Rankin, 1986). Third, the extended family member arrangement consists of a household in which a child resides with any relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, or older siblings) other than the biological parents. In most cases, this arrangement indicates that neither birth parent is present. A fourth family arrangement is the foster/adoptive family arrangement in which neither birth parent is present. In the adoptive family arrangement, the family does not have blood ties to the child, but the child is legally adopted. The foster family arrangement also excludes the birth parent, and a child may stay with families or individuals for extended periods of time, until a more permanent home is located for the child (Wells & Rankin, 1986). Other family arrangements may include but are not limited to children residing with gay or lesbian couples.

Current Research Focus

The current research attempted to answer the question, “How do variations in family arrangements relate to juvenile delinquency in terms of severity and frequency of crimes?” Specifically, this study used secondary data obtained from juvenile court files to examine three main hypotheses: (1) fewer juvenile offenders resided in two-parent family arrangements as opposed to any other family arrangement; (2) juvenile offenders who resided in family arrangements other than the two-parent family arrangement were more likely to commit serious delinquent acts or crimes; and (3) juvenile offenders who resided in family arrangements other than the two-parent family arrangement were more likely to be repeat offenders.

Method

File Study

This study was an archival study in that all information came from secondary data derived from case files of juvenile offenders located in a county detention center in western Alabama. Records examined were limited to those of youth who had contact with the juvenile justice system for the first time in the year 1996.

Procedure

Permission from the detention center’s director was necessary and was granted under the following terms: (1) there was no direct contact with the

youths, (2) data collection took place by appointment only, (3) names of the juveniles were not disclosed, and (4) to better ensure privacy and confidentiality for the juveniles, there was no direct contact with the youths' files. In addition, to further guarantee the confidentiality of the juveniles, all document review and information gathering were supervised by detention center staff. The director or one of his staff members obtained the requested information and provided it in the form of an electronic file. Permission from the university's Institutional Review Board was also obtained before data were collected.

Data collected included basic demographic information about the juveniles (age, sex, and race). Other information included the specific types of crimes committed by juveniles; the number of times a youth appeared in the system during 1996; and the youth's family arrangement. The study tracked juvenile offenders who had contact with the juvenile justice system in 1996 only.

Measures

Each specific offense was classified as a misdemeanor or felony, according to The Code of Alabama; misdemeanors are lesser crimes and felonies are more serious crimes. Misdemeanors are generally punishable by fines and/or less than one year in jail. In contrast, felonies are generally punishable for more than a year in prison (Code of Alabama, 1975).

Frequency of offending was measured in terms of whether an offender came into the system more than once within 1996. Chronic offenders were defined as individuals who entered the system four or more times within the one-year period.

Family arrangements were classified as two-parent, one-parent, extended family, foster family, or other family arrangement. Two-parent family arrangements were coded as "1", one-parent family arrangements as "2", and extended family arrangements as "3". Foster and other family arrangements were coded as "4" and "5", respectively.

Data Analysis

Correlational analysis was used to measure the relationships between the different variables; data were entered into a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) database and trends and patterns identified.

Results

This study examined the relationships between family arrangement, severity of offense, number of times a juvenile entered the system, age,

sex, and race. Variables were paired and point biserial correlations calculated for each pair. Frequency distributions and other descriptive statistics are also used to present some data.

The sample was comprised of 442 juveniles. Males made up 70% and females 30% of the sample. African Americans were disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system, accounting for 56% of the juvenile population, whereas Caucasians made up 44%. Of the juvenile offenses, 81% were misdemeanors and 19% were felonies. Also, 81% of the juveniles had only one offense during 1996; 19% were repeat offenders that year.

Findings Relevant to Research Questions

Hypothesis 1. The findings in regard to hypothesis one indicated, as predicted, that juvenile offenders tended to come from family arrangements other than the two-parent family arrangement. As shown below in Table 1, only about 1/3 (37%) of the youth had lived with two parents at the time of their offenses.

The following tables present frequency distributions of juveniles in each family arrangement, racial breakdown of juveniles by type of family arrangement, and gender breakdown of juveniles by each arrangement.

Table 1
Juveniles in Each Family Arrangement

2 Parent	1 Parent	Extended	Foster	Other	Missing Data
162 (37%)	231 (53%)	24 (6%)	2 (<1%)	14 (3%)	9 (2%)

Table 2
Racial Breakdown of Juveniles by Family Arrangement

Race	2 Parent	1 Parent	Extended	Foster	Other	Missing Data
African American (244)	47 (19%)	173 (71%)	14 (6%)	2 (<1%)	5 (2%)	3 (1%)
Caucasian (198)	115 (58%)	58 (29%)	10 (5%)	0	9 (5%)	6 (3%)
Total (442)	162 (37%)	231 (52%)	24 (5%)	2 (<1%)	14 (3%)	9 (2%)

Table 3
Gender Breakdown of Juveniles by Family Arrangement

Gender	2 Parent	1 Parent	Extended	Foster	Other	Missing Data
Females (131)	45 (34%)	71 (54%)	7 (5%)	0	6 (5%)	2 (2%)
Males (311)	117 (38%)	160 (51%)	17 (5%)	2 (< 1%)	8 (3%)	7(2%)
Total (442)	162 (37%)	231 (52%)	24 (5%)	2 (< 1%)	14 (3%)	9 (2%)

Hypotheses 2 and 3. The following table presents the point biserial correlation coefficients for each pairing of variables. Each measure is named across the top as well as down the side of the table. The correlation coefficients marked with asterisks are statistically significant; that is, only those pairs are related; the other pairs are not related.

Table 4
Correlation Matrix for Demographics, Family Structure, and Measures of Juvenile Delinquency

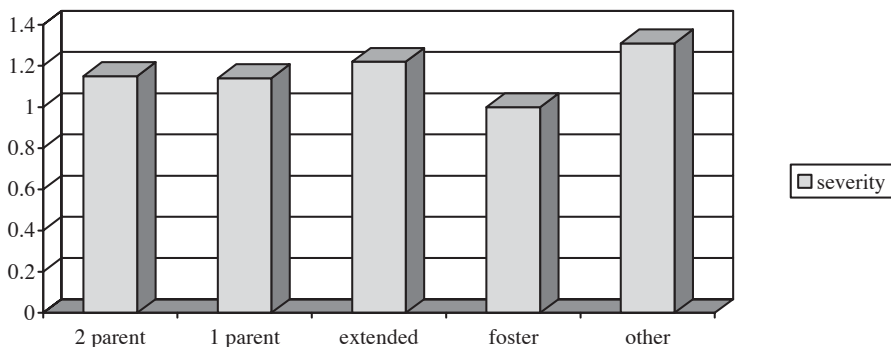
	Age	Gender	Race	Arrange	Frequency	Severity
Age	1.00	0.02	0.11*	0.12*	0.08	-0.03
Gender		1.00	-0.07	0.06	0.04	-.011
Race			1.00	-0.21**	0.04	-0.09
Arrange				1.00	-0.06	0.07
Frequency					1.00	0.17**
Severity						1.00

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .005$

Most important for the purposes of this study were correlation coefficients for family arrangement and severity of offense (hypothesis 2) and for family arrangement and frequency of offense (hypothesis 3). Both were non-significant, 0.07 for family arrangement and severity, -0.06 for family arrangement and the frequency variable. These values suggest there was no relationship between family arrangement and severity of offense nor between family arrangement and frequency of offense.

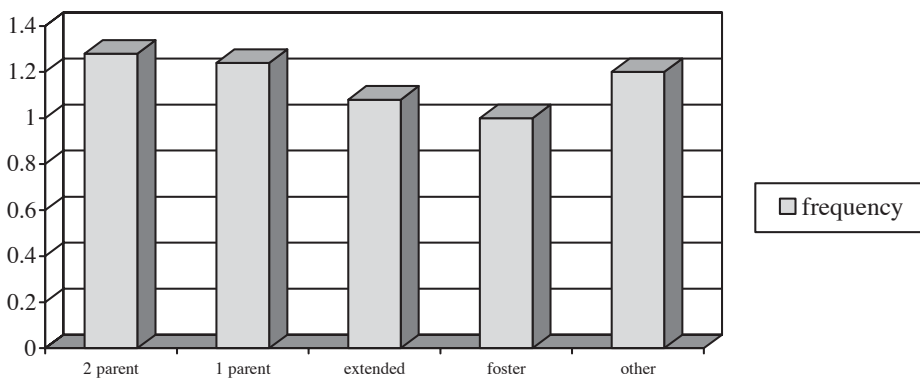
Family arrangement and severity of offense. Figure 1, below, presents the average severity of offense rating (with 1= misdemeanor and 2=felony) for youth coming from different family arrangements. As discussed previously and implied in Figure 1, types of family arrangement did not appear to be related to the severity of offending. Most groups' offenses were in the 1.0-1.2 range, that is, mostly misdemeanors

Figure 1
Family Arrangement and Severity of Offense



Family arrangement and frequency of offense. Also discussed previously, type of family arrangement and frequency of offense during a one-year period did not appear to be related significantly. As shown in Figure 2 below, average group scores ranged from a low of 1.0 for juveniles in foster care at the time of their offense to a high of about 1.3 for juveniles living in two-parent homes.

Figure 2
Family Arrangement and Repeated Offenses



Other Findings

As noted in the correlation matrix (Table 4 above), a few significant correlations were found, one for age and race. The coefficient between these variables was .11 ($p < .05$), reflecting a very small yet significant relationship. This correlation indicates that older first-time juvenile offenders were more likely to be Caucasian and younger ones more likely to be African American.

Age and family arrangement were also related ($r = .12, p < .05$), to a very small yet significant degree. This correlation indicated that older first-time offenders tended to come from family arrangements with higher coding numbers (extended family member arrangement, foster family arrangement or other family arrangement) versus younger first-time offenders tending to come from family arrangements with lower coding numbers (one- or two-parent family arrangement).

A third significant correlation was obtained between race and family arrangement ($r = -.21, p < .005$). This correlation reflects the tendency for the Caucasian offenders to come from family arrangements with lower coding numbers versus African Americans tending to come from family arrangements with higher coding numbers.

A final significant finding was the correlation obtained between frequency and severity of offense ($r = .17, p < .005$). This correlation indicated that repeat offenders tended to commit more serious offenses (felonies) whereas offenders with only one offense were more likely to commit less severe crimes (misdemeanors).

Discussion

The current study focused on juvenile delinquency in terms of the possible relationships between family arrangement and severity and frequency of offending. The research indicates that proportionately more juvenile offenders come from family arrangements other than the two-parent family home. However, the results do not support the hypothesis that juveniles residing in family arrangements other than the two-parent family arrangement are more likely to commit serious delinquent acts or crimes. The results also fail to support the hypothesis that juvenile offenders residing in family arrangement other than the two-parent family arrangement are more likely to be repeat offenders.

The data set also showed that only 19% of offenses were felonies and the remaining 81% misdemeanors; thus, the first-time offenders in the county in western Alabama studied were overwhelmingly prone to commit lesser rather than more severe offenses. In addition, only 19% of the

juvenile offenders were considered repeat offenders within the one-year period (1996). For these reasons, it is duly noted that family arrangements are not directly related to the severity and frequency of crimes committed by juvenile delinquents in the sample studied. Instead, family arrangements combined with other factors such as environmental factors, situational factors, and functional factors may provide more insight into juvenile delinquency than studying family structure alone.

Future Research

The current study, like most studies, produced promising results but had some limitations that possibly affected the outcomes. One such limitation was that all the data were received from data sheets of archival files only, which prevented all direct contact with juvenile delinquents and their files. This lack of contact with the juvenile offenders eliminated the possibility of knowing how the juveniles perceived their family arrangement, family environment, and the functioning of their family. A second limitation was the lack of contact with the juveniles' legal guardians, which eliminated possibilities of knowing, for example, how the guardians viewed their child-rearing strategies and whether or not they perceived these strategies to be an overt factor in juvenile delinquency. A third limitation was that some data were missing from the data sets but not enough to affect the results.

A variety of tactics may further future research involving juvenile delinquents. One approach that might yield promising results would be conducting a thorough examination of the family, for example, by interviewing juvenile offenders and their legal guardians. Another promising approach would be to find out about other variables like education levels and socioeconomic status and their impact on juvenile delinquency. A longitudinal study of juveniles' files, possibly following these juveniles over the span of ten years, would be useful to see whether these individuals will enter an adult correctional facility.

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