

Journal of Applied Juvenile Justice Services

Family Environment and Delinquency: Impressions of the People Doing the Work

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This paper examines the connection between family environment and delinquent acts. Where past research has utilized official data to explore this connection, we surveyed 357 juvenile justice professionals (mostly juvenile probation officers) and asked them about their opinion on this connection, based on their experience. Results showed that older, more conservative professionals believe that family environment plays a role in delinquent behavior, while younger, more liberal professionals do not.

INTRODUCTION

The changing American family is a fertile area of research in juvenile justice. Numerous changes in the American family during the past few decades have prompted controversy and debate over the meaning and implications of these trends, which include an increase in single parent families, and an increase in the number of children growing up in stepfamilies. While we recognize that juvenile delinquency is a multi-faceted problem on many societal levels, this study explores the connection between family environment and delinquency by surveying juvenile justice professionals in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to determine, based on their professional experience, if there is a relationship between family environment and delinquency and, if there is, what that relationship is. The juvenile justice system involves young people who are “closely connected to and assisted by their families,” so it is “somewhat surprising that scholars have not paid more attention” to the connection between family environment and delinquency (Arya, 2014, p. 627). In 2008, a survey was conducted by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University of juvenile probation leaders that found family engagement ranked as one of the most important issues facing their department (Arya, 2014). Our hope is to add to the (however nascent) literature in this area.

It is recognized that “family forms have become increasingly diverse” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 1291) and shifts in American families over the past few decades have “considerably altered” living arrangements for children today (Demuth & Brown, 2004, p. 58). In 2013, more than four in ten births were to unmarried women (Child Trends, 2014). Research has demonstrated that

children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to grow up in a single parent household, live in poverty, experience unstable living arrangements, and have socio-economic problems (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Demo & Cox, 2000; Haveman, Wolfe & Pierce, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). As these children reach adolescence they are more likely to have sex at a younger age, low educational achievement, and have birth outside of marriage (Aquillino, 1996; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Musick, 2002), as well as engage in higher levels of delinquency and school truancy than adolescents raised in two parent families (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Coley & Medeiros, 2007). In addition, due to the increasing number of non-marital births and divorces, a growing number of children are spending a part or all their adolescence living apart from their biological father (Coley & Medeiros, 2007).

A majority of unmarried births occur in cohabiting parents (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). In 2002, 20 percent of unmarried births were to cohabiting parents, but between 2006 and 2010 that number increased to 58% (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012). While these children are more likely to see their parents eventually marry than those born to non-cohabiting parents (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012), they are more likely to fare worse across a range of emotional and behavioral outcomes than those children born to married parents (Carlson, McLanahan & England, 2004). This is significant for, among other reasons, research has demonstrated that motivated parents who monitor their children see less substance abuse by those children (Dishion, Nelson & Kavanagh, 2003) than parents who either do not take such an active role or find it difficult because they are a single parent. Research has demonstrated that single parents (especially mothers) struggle with discipline and feel that they would benefit from a coparent (Sander, Sharkey, Olivarri, Tanigawa & Mauseth, 2010).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Vanassche, Sodermans, Metthijs and Swicegood studied the effect of family type on delinquency and alcohol use (2014). Using paper and pencil questionnaires with over 1,600 Flemish secondary school students, they found that children living in “non-intact families” were more likely to illegally drink alcohol, and that “high delinquent behavior” was more likely in boys from single parent families and girls in step families (Vanassche et al., 2014, p. 128).

Studies have shown that strong connections between parents and children and high levels of parental involvement act as protective factors against risky behavior (see Boyer, 2006; Crouter & Head, 2002). Han, Miller and Waldfogel (2010) used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Supplement to examine the effect of parental work schedules on adolescent behaviors and found that mothers who worked at night spent less time with their children and in turn these children were more likely to drink, smoke, and engage in delinquent behaviors. They also found that children between the ages of 12 and 14 who ate dinner with a parent five or more days a week were less likely to smoke, have sex, and use alcohol and marijuana (Han et al., 2010).

Schroder, Osgood and Oghia (2010) explored the effect of family structure, family time and family attachment on juvenile delinquency. Where previous research has only examined family

structure and juvenile delinquency, this study also looks at family time and attachment. Using the National Youth Survey, the researchers found that single parents in wave one of the survey that got married in wave three without having a good prior relationship with their children saw an increase in their child's juvenile delinquency. Children that continued to reside in two-parent homes committed the fewest number of delinquent acts and had the most interaction with their parents (Shroder et al., 2010).

Quensel, McArdle, Brinkley and Wiegersma (2002) examined the prevalence of delinquency related to family structures and peer associations. Over 3,000 juveniles (n=3,386) were sampled from five U.S. cities. They were all attending school and had a mean age of 15. The researchers first looked at family structure and then peer association, then they compared the two to see which had a higher significance (Quensel et al., 2002). While they found that juveniles raised by single mothers had a higher risk for offending than those in nuclear families, peer associations also played a significant role in whether a juvenile was delinquent, yet one did not outweigh the other.

Coley and Medeiros investigated the effect of nonresident father involvement on juvenile delinquency using data from *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study* which is a longitudinal study that was conducted in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio after welfare reform was implemented (2007). Using a sample of 647 adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14, they found that father involvement predicted a decrease in juvenile delinquency, but this effect was seen more with youth who engaged in higher levels of delinquency (Coley & Medeiros, 2007). They also found covariation in this relationship over time, meaning that as adolescent delinquency increased, so did paternal involvement.

Shaw and McKay evaluated the effect of broken homes in juvenile delinquency in 1932 and they argued that broken homes as a factor in juvenile delinquency was overstated. Their conclusions were due, in part, to their analysis of earlier work (see Burt, 1925) that reported about twice the rate of broken homes for delinquent (institutionalized) youth as non-delinquent (non-institutionalized) youth. Shaw and McKay said that the previous analysis failed to control for other factors (age, nationality) that might be related to delinquency.

Nye (1958) examined the influence of family structure on delinquency and found that family structure did not exert a direct effect on delinquent behavior. Nye found an indirect effect through social controls provided by relationships within the family. He stated that children from single parent homes were more likely to be delinquent, which (he argued) came from a loss of direct parental controls and decreased attachments.

Research that has focused more on delinquent behavior (rather than problem behavior) consistently demonstrates that children from broken homes are more delinquent than children from intact families, but the effects of family structure are mediated, in a large part, by family process, such as supervision and closeness (Demuth & Brown, 2004). Our understanding of the relationship between family structure and delinquency has been limited by defining family structure as broken or intact home and, also, by dichotomizing delinquent behavior (delinquent or not). Few scholars have examined the effect of the increasingly diverse living situations of

American youth (Demuth & Brown, 2004). This analysis will expand the limited definition of family structure (broken vs. intact home) by examining not just structure (married parents, single parents, and cohabiting parents), but also by examining the family environment by asking about how the delinquent youth are being raised¹. This paper also adds to the existing literature in two ways. One, by utilizing survey data we are moving away from the archival, official data that is normally used when addressing family factors and delinquency. The second way this paper is adding to the existing literature is that while the effect of family structure and environment on delinquency and crime has been established, we are surveying the professionals to see who is getting this message.

DATA AND MEASURES

Demographics

The authors called juvenile justice professionals in Pennsylvania and received permission to have the professionals in those counties take a survey that was created and placed on Survey Monkey. A total of 357 surveys were completed by line probation officers (n=200), school-based probation officers (n=48), supervisors (n=52), agency directors or assistant directors (n=16), and employees classified as other (n=14). Our sample has an average of just over 12 years experience working in the juvenile justice system, and an average age of 37.95 years. Over half (58.0%) of our sample are female, is overwhelmingly white (88.5%), and almost half have a Master's degree (45.7%). While everyone in the sample has at least a Bachelor's degree, the majority majored in Criminal Justice (63.6%), and most classify their political views as moderate (49.0%). Table 1 contains the demographic variables for our sample.

Family Environment

We asked the professionals about the family environments of the children with whom they work. Just under 60 percent (58.1) said that between 21 and 40 percent of the delinquents with whom they have worked lived with two married parents. About three quarters of professionals (74.4%) said that between 21 and 60 percent of delinquents had parents who were divorced. Though cohabiting seems to be a national trend (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012), only 29 percent of our sample had between 21 and 60 percent of their clients raised by cohabiting parents; for the majority (73.3%) it was between 0 and 20%. About the same percentages hold for delinquents who were raised by married but separated parents. The family environment results can be found in table 2.

The outcome variables for this study focused on the link between family environment and delinquency. Fourteen Likert scale statements were constructed using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree). The majority of our sample (88.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that a child's family environment influences delinquent behavior. However, a smaller majority (62.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that juveniles are personally responsible for their behavior. First, we examined the responses to the Likert statements, then we explored if any independent variables had an effect on the perceived importance of family environment and delinquency. For example, would someone with more years of experience have a different view than someone with less

¹ For example, in the statement "the children with whom I work are being raised to value education."

experience, or would males look at this relationship differently than females? An index was created by combining seven of the Likert scale questions gauging the importance of family environment which was used as our dependent variable². The Cronbach's Alpha for our index was an adequate .695. To explore for any effect between demographic and the dependent variable we employed linear regression, the results of which can be found in table 3.

Table 1. Demographic Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	%
Age	357	37.95	9.91	
Years of Experience	357	11.98	6.85	
Caseload Size	357	20.41	23.06	
Gender				
Male	150			42.0
Female	207			58.0
Highest Education Level				
Bachelors	194			54.3
Masters	163			45.7
Undergraduate Major				
Criminal Justice	227			63.6
Sociology	66			18.5
Psychology	32			9.0
Other	32			37.2
Social Work	8			2.2
Race				
White	316			88.5
Black	25			7.0
Latino	16			4.5
Other	0			0.0
Political Views				
Liberal	57			16.0
Moderate	175			49.0
Conservative	125			35.0

² A child's family environment influences delinquent behavior, the delinquency rate would go down if more children were raised in two parent families, the children with whom I work are being raised to value education, the children with whom I work are being raised to respect authority, children from two parent families have stronger bonds with their parents than children from one parent families, children from one parent families are victimized more than parents from two parent families, and children raised by two married parents are less likely to be delinquent than children being raised by two cohabiting parents.

Table 2. Family Environments

Variable	Range (%)	N	%
Percentage of juveniles living with two married parents.	0-20	16	18.6
	21-40	50	58.1
	41-60	18	20.9
	61-80	2	2.3
	81-100	0	0.0
Divorced parents	0-20	12	14.0
	21-40	34	39.5
	41-60	30	34.9
	61-80	10	11.6
	81-100	0	0.0
Separated parents	0-20	61	70.9
	21-40	18	20.9
	41-60	7	8.1
	61-80	0	0.0
	81-100	0	0.0
Cohabiting	0-20%	61	73.3
	21-40%	18	20.9
	41-60%	5	5.8
	61-80%	0	0.0
	81-100%	0	0.0
Living with a relative	0-20%	76	88.4
	21-40%	10	11.6
	41-60%	0	0.0
	61-80%	0	0.0
	81-100%	0	0.0

Table 3. Linear Regression Results on the Effect of Family Environment

Variable	B	S.E.	β	t	Sig
Experience	-.050	1.158	-.113	-1.422	.156
Age*	.078	.026	.252	2.974	.003
Gender**	2.345	.313	.379	7.480	.000
Caseload**	.024	.007	.179	3.407	.001
Education	.122	.317	.020	.384	.701
Politics**	1.479	.204	.401	7.235	.000
R ²	.270				
Adjusted R ²	.214				

*p<.05

**p<.01

RESULTS

Not one professional in our sample strongly disagreed with the statement that “the juvenile delinquency rate would decrease if more children were raised in two parent families,” but over one third of the sample (34.9%) were neutral. The majority (74.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “socioeconomic status has a stronger influence on juvenile delinquency than family environment.” The professionals in our study do not believe that the children in their care respect authority or value education. The majority of our sample strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statements “the children with whom I work are being raised to value education” (55.8%) and “the children with whom I work are being raised to respect authority” (44.2%³). On the statement “if drugs were harder to obtain the delinquency rate would go down”, our sample was pretty evenly split, with 39.5% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing, 41.8% strongly agreeing or agreeing, and 18.6% were neutral. The majority strongly disagreed or disagreed that “children raised in two parent families have stronger bonds with their parents than children raised in single parent families” (62.8%), “children raised in single parent families are more likely to be victimized than children raised in two parent families” (62.8%), and “children raised by two married parents are less likely to be delinquent than children raised by cohabiting parents” (53.5%⁴).

Three independent variables had an effect on perceived importance of family environment on delinquency. Older professionals ($B=.078$, $p<.05$), professionals who classify their political beliefs as conservative ($B=1.479$, $p<.05$), and female professionals ($B=2.345$, $p<.05$) thought that family environment had an effect on delinquent behavior. It is interesting that while age had an effect on the perception of the professional, years of experience did not.

DISCUSSION

This study employed a sample that is limited in its geographic scope, so the findings cannot be generalized. In addition, we utilized self-report data which has inherent validity and reliability issues (Maxfield & Babbie, 2014), but with a sample of professionals we think that validity should not be an issue. Whether we would find similar findings with a different, larger group of professionals in different areas should be addressed by future research.

While the professionals in our study recognized that there is a link between family environment and delinquency, it would appear that it is mainly the older, more conservative professionals who feel this way. It is interesting to note that political views and age were negatively correlated, which means that the older professionals were more politically liberal than the younger professionals. Could we then conclude that everyone (old, young, liberal and conservative) believes that family environment influences delinquent behavior?

If so, then what are the policy implications? If the belief is that delinquency is rooted in family environment, then programs would reflect that with an emphasis on interventions like family

³ 39.5% were neutral.

⁴ 27.9% were neutral.

counseling and parenting classes, especially when one considers the “age-crime curve,” which states that delinquent/criminal activity increases in late childhood, peaks in late adolescents, and declines in the early 20s (Arya, 2014, p. 625). If delinquency is rooted in the individual, then programs would emphasize individual therapy or interventions that stress personal accountability (i.e., boot camps). This is not a new debate in juvenile justice. Since almost the beginning of time, we have looked to the causes of juvenile delinquency in the devil, individual choice, internal pathologies, and society itself. Perhaps what causes juvenile delinquency is in the eye of the beholder, but it would appear that older, more conservative professionals understand the link between family environment and delinquency, while the younger, more liberal professionals perhaps should become better versed in the existing research on the subject. If research discovers a link between family environment and juvenile delinquency, the time for awareness on the part of the professionals working in the juvenile justice system to work towards making necessary reforms.

While we asked professionals about family environment and delinquency, future research should look at this issue but from a different direction. Liana Pennington examined parental attitudes toward the juvenile court process and found some family members who were “hostile to the legal process” (Pennington, 2012, p. 514). Pennington found that the lack of a defined role in the court process reinforced parents’ negative perceptions of the legal process (2012). Future research should continue down this line of inquiry to better help professionals engage with the families under their care.

APPENDIX A

Likert Scale Statements:

A child's family environment influences delinquent behavior.

Juveniles (age 10-18) are personally responsible for their behavior.

The juvenile delinquency rate would decrease if more children were raised in two parent families.

Being raised by two same sex parents is better for juveniles than being raised by one parent.

Socioeconomic status has a bigger influence on juvenile delinquency than family environment.

Juveniles are a product of their environment.

Peer associations have a stronger influence on delinquency than family environment does.

Juveniles raised in the foster care system are more likely to be delinquent than those raised in one parent families.

The children with whom I work are being raised to value education.

The children with whom I work are being raised to respect authority.

If more children were involved with Big Brothers/Big Sisters the delinquency rate would go down.

If more children were involved with the Police Athletic League the delinquency rate would go down.

If more juveniles were in mentoring programs the delinquency rate would go down.

If more juveniles were involved with after school activities the delinquency rate would go down.

If drugs were harder to obtain the delinquency rate would go down.

Children from two parent families have stronger bonds with their parents than children from one parent families.

Children from one parent families are victimized more than children from two parent families.

Children raised by two married parents have less of chance to commit a delinquent than children being raised by two cohabiting parents.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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