



Research Brief

Juvenile Delinquency and Family Structure: Implications for Marriage and Relationship Education

By Curt Alfrey, J.D.

Background

Juvenile delinquency is of perpetual concern in the United States. In 2007, law enforcement agencies reported 2.18 million arrests of juveniles (persons under age 18). There are two types of delinquency offenses. The first type of offense is a behavior that would be a criminal law violation for an adult. The other offense is called a “status” offense. Status offenses are delinquent actions that do not apply to adults, like running away and truancy. They make up only 5 percent of the offenses of juveniles in custody (Puzzanchera, 2009). The other 95 percent of juveniles in custody at any point in time (excluding those in adult prisons) are held for criminal delinquency offenses.

Juvenile delinquent behavior is believed to be under-represented due to the limited methods of collecting juvenile crime data. Juvenile arrests accounted for 16 percent of all violent crime arrests (i.e. murder, rape, assault) and 26 percent of all property crime arrests (i.e. burglary, theft, arson) (Puzzanchera, 2009). Other crimes for which juveniles are arrested include simple assault, vandalism, gambling, disorderly conduct, weapons possession, illicit drug/liquor violation (including DUI) and prostitution.

The types of crimes committed by juveniles are compiled through self-reporting or from reports provided by the juvenile justice system.

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It is estimated that \$14.4 billion is spent annually on the federal, state and local juvenile justice systems. This includes the costs of law enforcement and the courts, detention, residential placement, incarceration and substance abuse treatment. However, this figure does not include the costs of probation, physical and mental health care services, child welfare and family services, school costs and the costs to victims. It is estimated that combined, spending on juvenile justice could exceed \$28.8 billion (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University, 2004).

Gang membership among juveniles has become a major issue over the past few decades in regards to juvenile delinquency. Concurrent with the re-emergence of youth gangs in the 1980s and 1990s (after a hiatus in the 1970s), the juvenile homicide rate doubled (Covey, Menard, and Franzese, 1997). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2000), to be

considered a gang, a group must have more than two members and the members must fall within the age range of 12-24. The group must also show some stability (as opposed to transient youth groups), and a central element of the group is involvement in criminal activity. It is the criminal activity that separates gangs from other youth groups (like school clubs) that would otherwise meet the criteria.

Members of youth gangs are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than their peers (Egley & Major, 2003). In 2007, youth gang membership was estimated at 788,000 and total youth gangs at 27,000. This represents a resurgence in gang activity following a marked decline from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009). Data compiled from self-reporting by gang members in urban areas shows that gang members are three times more likely to say they had been arrested and five times more likely to report they had sold drugs. In various surveys in urban areas across the U.S., gang members reported being three times more likely than non-gang members (not in the juvenile justice system) their age to commit break-ins and assaults, four times more likely to commit felony thefts, and eight times more likely to commit robberies (Egley & Major, 2003).

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(Georgia Supreme Court Commission on Children Marriage and Family Law, 2005). Policymakers are beginning to recognize the link between family structure and juvenile crime. For example, a study conducted in Wisconsin found that the incarceration rate for children of divorced parents was 12 times higher than for children in two-parent families (Fagan, 2001).

This research brief will explore the association between juvenile delinquency and family structure and provide a brief discussion of the implications for marriage education.

What the Research Says

Family Structure and Juvenile Crime

A 1998 U.S. longitudinal study tracking over 6,400 boys for over 20 years found that children who grew up without their biological father in the home were roughly three times more likely to commit a crime that led to incarceration than children from intact families (Harper & McLanahan, 1998). Others have found that children of divorced parents are up to six times more likely to be delinquent than children from intact families (Larson, Swyers & Larson, 1995). Boys raised without their fathers were more than twice as likely to end up in jail as those raised with their fathers, and 70% of incarcerated adults come from single-parent homes (Georgia Supreme Court Commission on Children, Marriage and Family Law, 2004).

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A 2005 policy brief from the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy (IMAPP) found that both the individual risk and overall rates of crime were reduced when parents were

married. The brief summarized 23 U.S. studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2005, and determined that areas with high rates of family fragmentation (especially unwed childbearing) tended to have higher rates of crime. In addition, they found evidence that teens raised in single-parent homes were more likely to commit crimes (IMAPP Policy Brief, 2005). In one study, adolescents in single-parent and kinship families were “significantly more likely than adolescents in intact families to report having been in a serious physical fight in the past year, to have seriously injured someone in the past year, and to have shot or stabbed someone in the past year; they were almost two and three times more likely to have pulled a knife or a gun on someone in the past year” (Franke, 2000). Beyond a youth’s immediate family, the prevalence of two-parent families in the community appears to influence the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. A study from the *Journal of Criminal Justice* looked not only at the individual juvenile’s family structure, but also at the structures of those with whom the juvenile interacted to determine the frequency with which an individual juvenile committed delinquent acts (Anderson, 2002). In a non-random sample of 4,671 eighth graders drawn from 35 schools in ten cities that offered the Gang Resistance Education and Training program, they found that adolescents who were living in a single-parent family were at a significantly higher risk for delinquency than those adolescents living with two parents. These elevated rates held true for juvenile crimes involving both property and violent crime indexes, in addition to status juvenile crimes.

Students attending schools with a higher proportion of single-parent families also had significantly higher rates of violent offenses than students attending schools where more students came from two-parent families (Anderson, 2002).

Marital Quality and Juvenile Crime

Families characterized by warm interpersonal relationships and effective parenting are associated with a lower likelihood of affiliation with juvenile offenders and of juvenile crime. Similarly, children raised by married parents with low-conflict marriages are better off emotionally. Where there is a high level of marital discord, considerable conflict, inadequate supervision and violence, children are more likely to become delinquent (Henry, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 2001).

Supervision and Juvenile Delinquency

When there is one parent living in the home as opposed to two, it is more difficult to supervise children all the time. Every day activities like errands and work must be completed by the parent, which leaves no parent in the home. Because of this, children in single-parent homes tend to receive lower levels of supervision. There is a strong correlation between lack of parental supervision and an increased likelihood of juvenile substance abuse, criminality and delinquency.

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Although demographic characteristics alone cannot explain gang affiliation, family structure has long been considered integral to understanding gang behavior. For example, gang membership historically was identified in literature as a possible result of identity problems for young men when a male role model was not in the home (Egley & O’Donnell, 2009). Empirical evidence shows that minority youth residing in single-parent households are

at a greater risk for joining gangs than white youth from two-parent households. Several researchers have suggested that “the gang can serve as a surrogate extended family for adolescents who do not see their own families as meeting their needs for belonging, nurturance and acceptance” (Reed & Decker, 2002). Family problems were cited as one of the major distinguishing factors for females who were members of gangs versus those who were not (Miller, 1998).

Implications

It is important to consider the context of the relationship between family structure and juvenile delinquency. Single-parent families often are financially vulnerable as compared to married households (Garfinkel & MacLanahan, 1986). In turn, these economic circumstances frequently draw these families into more affordable but ‘bad’ neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987). School officials, the police, the courts and the ‘system,’ respond and react to children of these homes in ways that identify them as delinquents (Johnson, 1986).

Children growing up with two attentive, involved biological parents in a healthy, low-conflict marriage are more likely to experience an overall sense of well-being and less likely to become delinquent as opposed to children growing up in other circumstances.

The greatest opportunity to prevent juvenile substance abuse and crime can be found within our families. Strong and positive families have an early and sustained impact on reducing substance abuse, increasing school bonding and academic performance, dealing with conduct disorders, avoiding delinquent peers and reducing juvenile crime. The most critical family characteristics that help youth avoid associations with delinquent peers are parental supervision and monitoring as well as parental care and support. Interventions designed to reduce family conflict, increase family involvement, and improve parental monitoring

have been shown to reduce juvenile substance abuse and crime (Kumpfer, 1999).

Research makes clear that the potential for future juvenile delinquency among youths can be significantly diminished by providing parents and juveniles with skills for relationship-strengthening, personal growth and family enhancement.

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Additional Resources

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