

Marriage and Family as Deterrents from Delinquency, Violence and Crime

Summary

Children raised in intact families are less likely to display delinquent or antisocial behavior. They are also less likely to be victimized themselves.

- **Youth Delinquency.** Adolescents living in intact families are less likely to engage in delinquency than their peers living in non-intact families. Compared to peers in intact families, adolescents in single-parent families and stepfamilies were more likely to engage in delinquency. This relationship appeared to be operating through differences in family processes—parental involvement, supervision, monitoring, and parent-child closeness—between intact and non-intact families.¹
- **Youth Anti-social Behavior.** Youths living in traditional intact families are less likely to exhibit antisocial behavior. Compared to peers living in traditional intact families (two married-biological parents), youths living in two-biological-parent blended families, two-biological-parent cohabiting families, biological-mother-stepfather families, biological-mother-cohabiting-partner families, biological-mother-only families, biological-father-cohabiting-partner families, biological-father-only families, grandparent-only families, and foster families engaged, on average, in higher levels of anti-social behavior (ranging from running away from home, being suspended from school, and substance abuse to committing minor property crime, engaging in violent behavior, and becoming arrested). This was true taking into consideration youths' gender, race, age, and their residential and family environment.²
- **Youth Property Crimes.** Youths living in intact families are less likely to commit serious property crimes than peers living in single-parent families. Compared to peers in intact families, adolescents living in single-mother families were more likely to engage in delinquent acts involving serious property crimes. This was true taking into consideration adolescents' and parents' characteristics as well as family processes (such as parental involvement, parental supervision, parental monitoring, and parent-child closeness).³
- **Youth Violent Delinquency.** Adolescents living in intact families are less likely to engage in serious violent delinquency compared to peers living in non-intact families. Compared to peers in intact families, adolescents in single-mother, single-father, and mother-stepfather families were more likely to engage in serious violent delinquency, controlling for adolescents' and parents' characteristics as well as family processes (such as parental involvement, parental supervision, parental monitoring, and parent-child closeness).⁴
- **Neighborhood Youth Violence.** Communities with lower proportions of non-intact families

tend to report lower levels of neighborhood youth violence. An increase in the proportion of single-parent families in a neighborhood was associated with a significant increase in youth violence.⁵

- **Incarceration. Growing up without a father is associated with higher odds of incarceration later in life.** Throughout childhood (from birth, infancy to age four, age five to nine, age 10 to 14, and age 15 to 17), growing up without a father was associated with higher odds of incarceration later in life. This study controlled for mother's education, whether or not mother gave birth as a teen, race, urban and regional residence, neighborhood socioeconomic status, family income, family size, and age. Individuals who grew up in households without ever experiencing the presence of a father tended to have the highest odds of incarceration.⁶
- **Criminal Offending. For men, marriage appears to be associated with a decreased likelihood of criminal offending.** For men, marriage appeared to be significantly and negatively associated with the likelihood of criminal offending, even after taking into consideration that individuals with certain characteristics were more likely to marry than others.⁷
- **Child Victimization. Young children living in intact families are less likely to experience child victimization.** Children age two to seven living with two biological or adoptive parents were significantly less likely to experience sexual assault, child maltreatment, other types of major violence, and non-victimization type of adversity and were less likely to witness violence in their families compared to peers living in single-parent families and stepfamilies.⁸
- **Child Victimization. Adolescents living in intact families are less likely to experience child victimization.** Children age 10 to 17 living with two biological or adoptive parents were

significantly less likely to experience sexual assault, child maltreatment, other types of major violence, and non-victimization type of adversity and were less likely to witness violence in their families compared to peers living in single-parent families and stepfamilies.⁹

- **Homicide. Counties with lower proportions of non-intact families tend to experience lower rates of homicide.** Counties with higher proportions of father-absent or mother-absent families tended to experience higher rates of homicide compared to counties with lower proportions of non-intact families. For example, the female homicide rate in a county with a high level of father-absent families (around 20 percent) was predicted to be 40 percent higher than a more typical county, in which 15 percent of the families had absent fathers; the male homicide rate was predicted to be 95 percent higher. Similarly, a county with a high level of mother-absent families (about 7 percent) was predicted to have a female homicide rate that was 24 percent higher and a male homicide rate that was 40 percent higher than a more typical county in which the average percent of mother-absent families was about 5 percent.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Stephen Demuth and Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure, Family Processes, and Adolescent Delinquency: The Significance of Parental Absence Versus Parental Gender," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 41, No. 1 (February 2004): 58-81.
- 2 Robert Apel and Catherine Kaukinen, "On the Relationship between Family Structure and Antisocial Behavior: Parental Cohabitation and Blended Households," *Criminology* 46, No. 1 (March 2008): 35-70.
- 3 Demuth, "Family Structure," 58-81.
- 4 Demuth, "Family Structure," 58-81.
- 5 Chris Knoester and Dana L. Haynie, "Community Context, Social Integration into Family, and Youth Violence," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, No 3. (August 2005): 767-780.
- 6 Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14, No. 3 (September 2004): 369-397.
- 7 Ryan D. King, "The Context of Marriage and Crime: Gender, the Propensity to Marry, and Offending in Early Adulthood," *Criminology* 45, No. 1 (2007): 33-65.

8 Heather A. Turner, "The Effect of Lifetime Victimization on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents," *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 62, No. 1, (January 2006), pp. 13-27.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Jennifer Schwartz, "Effects of Diverse Forms of Family Structure on Female and Male Homicide," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (December 2006), pp. 1291-1312.



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