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Parental Divorce: A Protection from Later Delinquency for Maltreated Children

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Family structure and maltreatment (abuse and neglect) have been identified as predictors of youth delinquency, although the relationship is not clear. This article furthers this research by studying a sample of maltreated children (n = 250) in one Midwest county, and through a multiple regression analysis of many risk factors, the study identified only one significant delinquency variable that made delinquency less likely—children who experience parental divorce. Some established risk factors were surprisingly found not to be predictive of later delinquency: minority race, one-parent families, youth substance abuse, recurrent maltreatment, and youth behind in academic grade level. Implications for the family studies and juvenile justice fields are set forth.

KEYWORDS *maltreatment, divorce, delinquency, family*

The deleterious effects of divorce on children have been well documented (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). Indeed, children of divorce experience problems with social relationships, self-concept, psychological adjustment, academic achievement, and conduct (Amato, 2001). One of the more serious issues linked to family dissolution is juvenile delinquency. Although the role of divorce has been widely studied in relationship to juvenile delinquency (Price & Kunz, 2003; Wells & Rankin, 1991), the path to juvenile delinquency among victims of child maltreatment who have experienced parental divorce has not been widely studied (Heck & Walsh, 2000). As juvenile delinquency, child maltreatment, and divorce rates continue to climb, it is important to evaluate the possible interrelationship of these serious issues.

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This article briefly recounts the literature regarding delinquency, child maltreatment, and divorce. Following this, methodology and findings from a unique study that evaluates possible factors that predict future delinquency among a sample of maltreated youth are presented. The article concludes with discussion and implications of these findings for the family field.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND MALTREATMENT

Juvenile delinquency has been a concern, to varying degrees, for decades (Roberts, 2004). Today, of the 1,615,400 youths adjudicated delinquent nationwide in 2002 (Stahl, 2006), a total of 350,000 were held in 591 detention centers (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006; Sickmund, Sladky, & Wang, 2004), and 102,300 were held in 2,964 correctional facilities (Sickmund, 2006). On an average day in the United States, 54,500 youths are incarcerated in this country's detention or correctional institutions (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003; Sickmund et al., 2004). These detentions and incarcerations harm the youth and their family relationships and make it more likely the youth will continue delinquent and offending activities (Benda & Tollet, 1999; Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006; Torres & Ooyen, 2002).

Although no single factor is responsible for delinquency (Maas, Herrenkohl, & Sousa, 2008; Preski & Shelton, 2001; Turner, Hartman, Exum, & Cullen, 2007; D. C. Widom & Maxfield, 2001), there exist multiple risks in children's backgrounds including deficits in family, school, and neighborhoods (Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer, & Schaible, 2006; Heilbrun, Goldstein, & Redding, 2005; Howell, 2003; Loeber & Farrington, 2001; Mears & Aron, 2003; Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002). Some established delinquency risk factors include gender (Loper, 1999; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; C. S. Widom, 1991), minority race (Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990), poverty (Brown, 1984; D. C. Widom & Maxfield, 2001), early childhood behavior problems (Buka & Earls, 1993; Howing, Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Herbst, 1990; Loeber & Dishion, 1983), impaired child cognitive functioning (Buka & Earls, 1993; Yoshikawa, 1994), youth and family substance abuse (Rapp-Palicchis & Roberts, 2004; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002), and poor family functioning (C. S. Widom, 1991).

These risk factors tend to be cumulative and to have interactive effects, making prediction challenging for practitioners (Ford, Chapman, Hawke, & Albert, 2007; Lemmon, 2006). However, a history of maltreatment (being a victim of abuse or neglect) continues to be found even in the presence of these other risk factors (Lemmon, 1999; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Wiebush, McNulty, & Le, 2000). Currently, a public policy concern is that these maltreated children constitute between 40% (640,000) and 60% (960,000) of the 1.6 million youth adjudicated delinquent annually (Currie & Tekin, 2006; Ford et al., 2007; Loeber & Farrington, 2001;

Preski & Shelton, 2001; Stahl, 2006). Although the link between maltreatment and delinquency is complicated (Smith & Thornberry, 1995), these offending youth pose a substantial challenge to numerous social policy systems.

Family Structure

Divorce within families is quite common today in the United States (Heck & Walsh, 2000). As of 2003, 43% of all custodial mothers and 56% of all custodial fathers were either separated or divorced. The percentage of the population that is divorced has steadily increased when viewed annually—6% in 1980, 8% in 1990, and 10% in 2000—with up to 50% of all marriages ending in divorce (Price & Kunz, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

In previous research that has identified a link between poor family functioning and delinquency, broken homes (including divorce) have been widely studied as a cause of later juvenile delinquency adjudication (Amato & Keith, 1991; Patterson, Reid, & Dishon, 1992; Price & Kunz, 2003; Rebellon, 2002; Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, & Telesca, 2001; Wells & Rankin, 1991). However, there is still not a consensus as to the impact these family changes have on delinquency rates (Degarmo & Forgatch, 2005; Heck & Walsh, 2000), although three out of four youth in state correctional facilities experienced a parental divorce, separation, or their parents never marrying (Price & Kunz, 2003). Previous research that has tried to provide clarity included studies that broadly defined families as intact or not (Rebellon, 2002), defined these changes as marital transitions (Degarmo & Forgatch, 2005), used smaller and unrepresentative samples (Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997), and used self-reports of delinquency (Kaufman, 2000), all with varying external validity limitations for the field.

Others have attempted to organize and understand the research findings. Kunz (1992) reviewed the literature and found that many studies concluded that divorce has negative consequences for youth delinquent acts. Conversely, many studies found no difference for children in intact homes (Kunz, 1992). Wells and Rankin (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of literature and found that youth from broken homes are slightly more likely to be adjudicated delinquent (10–15% higher than intact families) but did not find consistent evidence of severe offending by these youth. Price and Kunz (2003) found in a meta-analysis of 72 studies that children from divorced homes have higher delinquency rates compared to children from intact homes. Heck and Walsh (2000) measured both delinquency and maltreatment more comprehensively and found that when controlling for family structure, the maltreatment to delinquency risk was significant, whereas Rebellon (2002) used a national probability sample of adolescents and identified that divorce experienced by younger children might be a stronger predictor of later delinquency than previous research had found.

To date, there look to be no published studies utilizing comparative samples of children who have been victims of maltreatment and their later delinquency outcomes. Previous literature used juvenile delinquent populations, which did include maltreatment victims, and other studies used youth with divorced-parent families and delinquent populations.

Summary of Literature Review

To summarize, juvenile delinquency is an expansive and damaging problem. Poor family functioning is a known risk factor for youth delinquency. Victims of child maltreatment are overrepresented among juvenile delinquents. Although risk factors for juvenile delinquency, including poor family functioning, have been previously identified, predicting (via risk or less risk) future delinquency among victims of child maltreatment is unique to this study.

This study continues these inquiries of delinquency risk and asks which of six factors (race, marital status, family structure, substance abuse disorder, recurrent maltreatment, and school grade behind) are significantly predictive of later youth delinquency adjudication among a random sample of maltreated children. Findings from this study will help professionals who work with at-risk families, families who have experienced divorce, and maltreated children identify risk and protective factors for delinquency and employ appropriate interventions to help prevent future delinquency.

METHOD

Research Design and Sampling

This study utilized a nonconcurrent group design. The study's population was all children who experienced maltreatment (substantiated abuse or neglect) in one midwest county between 1990 and 2004 ($N = 23,070$). From this County Children's Services population, one randomly drawn sample ($n = 125$) and one matched sample of children ($n = 125$) were studied in total ($n = 250$).

The first group of 125 youth was chosen from the population by first identifying a subset of all maltreated children—those who after maltreatment was substantiated were adjudicated delinquent by the County Juvenile Court in calendar years 2005 and 2006 (from a population of 790 delinquency adjudications). To determine delinquency, the County Juvenile Court provided the County Children's Services a list of all youth chosen for this group that the Court judges adjudicated delinquent. Reliability checks with identifying information were provided between public entities to ensure accuracy. From this 2-year frame, a simple random sample of delinquent youth (with maltreatment histories) was drawn for the study's first group.

Next, a matched cohort group from the population was identified, including only those maltreated youth who were not adjudicated delinquent by the County Juvenile Court. This group was identified by using the first group's characteristics and matching on the following established delinquency risk factor variables: gender; age in years (on January 1, 2007), and calendar year of first documented substantiated maltreatment.

Data Collection

The County Children's Services Agency provided copies of case files for the children and families involved in the study. These files were deidentified and the study received university institutional review board approval. These family case files included intake and assessments, referrals, investigation chronology, investigation findings, family history records, client running logs, and central registry conclusions. Secondary data analysis of these archival records was utilized to measure the variables of interest. Intercoder reliability of this data entry and coding was high (.96).

Measurements

Six independent variables were utilized in this analysis. All variables were measured categorically: race (African-American = 1, Caucasian = 2, Hispanic-American = 3), marital status (divorced = 1, never divorced = 2, never married = 3), family structure (one parent or two parents), youth substance abuse disorder (yes or no), number of substantiated maltreatment (abuse or neglect) child welfare investigation findings (one or two = 1, three or more = 2), and behind at least one grade level in school (yes or no). One dependent variable was measured: delinquency adjudication by the juvenile court (yes or no).

Data Analysis

Logistic regression analysis was used to investigate which independent variables (race, marital status, family structure, substance abuse disorder, recurrent maltreatment, and school grade behind) predict future delinquency among victims of child maltreatment. Because this investigation is exploratory in nature, a forward stepping method was used. Data were screened for missing data and outliers. A preliminary multiple regression was conducted to calculate Mahalanobis distance and to examine multicollinearity among the predictors. Tolerance for all variables was greater than .1, indicating multicollinearity was not a problem. One case was eliminated as an outlier.

Bivariate logistic regression was used to determine which variables would be entered into the multivariate model—identifying all six to be

included. Variables significant in the bivariate mode at less than .1 were included in the multivariate model. Multiple binary logistic regression was then performed (Indicator = last).

RESULTS

The majority of youth were Caucasian (55.3%; minority youth, 44.7%) and lived in one-parent homes (65.9%; two-parent homes, 34.1%), with over 80% of these youth experiencing either a parental divorce or having their parents never marry (parents who remained married, 19.3%). Approximately one in six of the youth had a substance abuse disorder, were behind one or more academic grades in school, or both; children's services found these youth were maltreated (abused or neglected) an average of three separate times (see Table 1).

Regression results indicated the overall model fit of one predictor, marital status ($-2\text{Log likelihood} = 187.19$), was statistically reliable in distinguishing delinquency status, $\chi^2(10, N = 188) = 70.358, p = .001$. The model correctly classified 72.3% of cases. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 2. Wald statistics indicated that marital status—specifically youth from divorced families—significantly protects from later delinquency adjudication. Other predictive variables were not found to be significantly related to delinquency—race, family structure, youth substance abuse disorder, recurrent maltreatment, and behind in school grade level.

TABLE 1 Descriptive Profile

Variable	Frequency (%)
Race	
African-American	28.5
Caucasian	55.3
Hispanic-American	7.7
Other	8.5
Marital status	
Divorced	40.5
Never divorced	19.3
Never married	40.2
Family structure	
One parent	65.9
Two parents	34.1
Youth substance abuse disorder	16.5
Number of substantiated children's services findings (recurrent)	3.1 (<i>M</i> ; 2.1 <i>SD</i>)
Behind one or more grades in school	17.4

TABLE 2 Regression Coefficients

Variable	<i>B</i>	Wald	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio
Race		2.71	3	.44	—
African-American	0.63	1.06	1	.30	1.87
Caucasian	0.64	1.21	1	.27	1.9
Hispanic-American	1.39	2.62	1	.106	4.03
Other	—	—	—	—	—
Marital status		7.45	2	.02	
Divorced	-1.11	6.70	1	.01	0.33
Never divorced	-0.04	0.005	1	.94	0.96
Never married	—	—	—	—	—
Family structure (one parent)	0.68	2.36	1	.13	1.97
Youth substance abuse disorder	21.61	0.00	1	.99	0.00
Recurrent maltreatment	0.42	1.28	1	.26	1.52
Behind one or more grades in school	-0.39	0.46	1	.50	0.68

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the relationship among six possible risk factors and later youth delinquency among a sample of maltreated youth. For this sample of maltreated children, the only risk factor that was significantly related to later delinquency was whether their parents divorced—here this divorce outcome made later adjudication less likely for the youth when compared to youth from never-married families. This is somewhat surprising when reviewing more recent family functioning literature, which found higher delinquency rates for children and youth, with and without maltreatment histories, who experienced parental divorce (Heck & Walsh, 2000; Price & Kunz, 2003; Rebellon, 2002). These differential outcomes may be explained in that very limited research to date has tried to explain the maltreatment, delinquency, and family structure connections. Those who did used samples of youth that were all under juvenile court probation (some with maltreatment histories; Heck & Walsh, 2000), whereas this study used comparative delinquent and nondelinquent groups, all with maltreatment histories. Although this study's results have limitations, the findings support the notion that family divorce and youth delinquency adjudication are linked. A unique addition is that these findings are from a sample of children who all experienced maltreatment—half of whom were later adjudicated delinquent. This allows for more sophisticated comparisons between these two groups. These findings suggest this link between parental divorce and later juvenile delinquency is a protective relationship (Heck & Walsh, 2000).

Also of unique interest is that this study's results did not confirm numerous established delinquency risk factors—minority race, one-parent family structure, youth substance abuse disorders, recurrent maltreatment, and youth behind in academic grade level. This suggests that the risk factors

for later delinquency among maltreated youth might indeed differ from risk factors for youth who have not been maltreated.

Other issues might impact the interpretation of these findings. For example, minority youth are consistently overrepresented within the juvenile justice system (disproportionate minority contact phenomenon) and in this study sample. This is a widely acknowledged and relevant concern (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000). Another pertinent issue is that one-parent experiences represent a larger percentage of family structure for adjudicated delinquent youth when compared to nondelinquent youth, although the link is somewhat complicated (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003). This study did not find this link, either because it does not exist within the sample reviewed or because of methodological limitations. Similarly, youth who abuse substances and are struggling in school performance are at higher risk for delinquency (American Bar Association, 2007; Mears & Aron, 2003). These factors were not found here as significant predictors, but these variables deserve further investigation, particularly by more broadly studying and measuring cognitive youth impairments that might be impacting school outcomes.

These results should be reviewed in light of research that has found delinquency to be a cumulative outcome for the child, with these risk and protective factors having interactive effects (Ford et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 2000; Wiebush et al., 2000). Predicting delinquency is a difficult research-to-practice task for professional fields involved, and one that should not be performed in a vacuum of understanding. However, identifying maltreated children who are most at risk for later delinquency is an important endeavor. This study supports the notion that maltreated children who experience parental divorce are less at risk than maltreated children whose parents never married—with divorce acting as a protective factor. Fortunately, delinquency adjudication is not the inevitable outcome for all maltreated children; risk and protective factors interact to help minimize these harsh outcomes. Additional protective factors have been identified by other researchers to include a strong parent–child attachment, youth having a close relationship with at least one adult, clear and consistent family norms, increased parent monitoring, and youth involvement in prosocial recreational activities (Hawkins et al., 2000; Howell, 2003), although these factors were not studied in this project.

Continued research and preventative interventions targeting this population are important for these children, their families, and the social policy systems designed to support at-risk families and prevent juvenile delinquency outcomes. For example, it might be useful to utilize a court-supported intervention—such as a parent education program focused on divorce, parents who do not marry, and parental conflict (Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). Intervention programs also exist that are designed to reduce aggression, anxiety, and depression, and enhance social competency among children whose parents

are divorcing and might extend to parents who chose not to marry (Brown et al., 1994).

Limitations

These results have some limitations. First, the findings are of a relatively small sample from only one Midwest county of maltreated children, served by one children's services agency, limiting the external validity. Although replication is necessary, some findings use is in order. Second, because of the smaller sample size, variations in the model might be too small to produce stable estimates—the model should be further tested with larger groups. Third, variables chosen for inclusion and measurement in this study were based on previous research literature outcomes. There is a chance that other variables could have been found to be statistically significant (or not) in predicting later delinquency, but were not utilized. Finally, this study employed secondary data analysis. Although reliability checks were performed, the extent to which the original data files contained errors is unknown.

Conclusions

This study found that within a sample of maltreated children there were interesting risk and protective factor findings in predicting later delinquency adjudication. Traditional risk factors for juvenile delinquency were not found to be significant in this study, whereas parental divorce, compared to parents not marrying, was found to lessen this juvenile court outcome. Although replication of this small study is certainly in order, findings from this study point to some important practical considerations for professionals who work with children and families. It might be prudent for these professionals to develop a specialized treatment plan for children with and without divorced parents who have a documented history of maltreatment. It might be the case that traditional interventions to prevent juvenile delinquency might have a different focus with victims of maltreatment who have experienced divorce. Future research should examine the effectiveness of various preventative interventions with this subset of children and youth.

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