2010

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Cohabiting, Family and Community Stressors, Selection, and Juvenile Delinquency

Criminal Justice Review

35(4) 393-411

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DOI: 10.1177/0734016810379338

<http://cjr.sagepub.com>

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Abstract

Prior research has established that children from traditional, two-parent nuclear families experience a lower risk of delinquency than children raised in alternative family structures. However, many studies have ignored the effect of *parental cohabiting* on delinquent development. A growing body of research suggests that cohabiting (even among biological parents) may be harmful to children. This study tests the hypothesis that cohabiting is associated with four different types of delinquent behavior. It examines two theoretical models, a *family stress model* and a *community stress/selection model*, as possible explanations of “the cohabiting effect.” The analysis reveals that cohabiting is generally associated with increased risk of misbehavior (although the effects do vary somewhat by type of delinquency). Although the theoretical models could not completely explain “the cohabiting effect,” substantial evidence of both mediation and moderation is found. The implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords

family structure, cohabiting, delinquency, theory

Introduction

Although there has been a great deal of research conducted on family structure and delinquency, our understanding of the family–delinquency relationship remains incomplete. The primary reason for this may be attributed to the fact that the family is not a static institution. Since 1950, for example, the American nuclear family has arguably undergone more change than at any other time in history. While the two-parent, married family still accounts for about half of all households, other nontraditional family structures have become increasingly numerous and culturally normative (America’s families, 2001; Lugalia & Overturf, 2004; Wilson, 2002). Of these, the “cohabiting family” has emerged as a relatively common nontraditional family structure in the United States.

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Cohabiting is defined as two people living together as a couple without being married (Stets, 1991). It is one of the fastest growing family structures in the United States. For example, between 1990 and 2007, there was an 88% increase in cohabiting couples (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008a), with a tenfold increase since 1960 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), leading to approximately 12 million unmarried partners currently living together (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008b). It is estimated that 40% of cohabiting households have children under the age of 18 living in these family structures (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003) with some researchers estimating that one in four children will live in a cohabiting household before they reach the age of 18 (Graefe & Lichter, 1999). In spite of its growing popularity, some theorists posit that "cohabiting is an unstable family form" (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004, p. 210).

Couples cohabiting raise a number of social issues. Cohabiting has been examined in the context of victimization (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2007), domestic violence (Stets, 1991), as a precursor to divorce (Teachman, 2003), as an explanation of increased divorce rates upon marriage (Axinn & Thorton, 1992; Hall & Zhao, 1995), decreased levels of happiness and commitment (Nock, 1995), and higher levels of marital disagreement (Brines & Joyner, 1999). Research has also examined cohabiting among the elderly for financial security (Chevan, 1996), in terms of childbearing practices (Loomis & Landale, 1994), and examined the potential negative impact on children when transitioning into, and out of, cohabiting relationships (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Of the many social issues that cohabiting raises, one of the most important involves the increased risk of delinquency for children living in such families.

Notwithstanding the extensive research literature on juvenile delinquency, in general, little is known about how, and why, contemporary family forms, such as cohabiting unions, influence the development of delinquency. Therefore, this study attempts to improve the discipline's understanding of the family structure/delinquency relationship by empirically assessing the relationship between parental cohabiting and several different types of delinquent behavior. The analysis also explores several plausible theoretical explanations for how the causal sequence operates.

Literature Review

The relationship between family structure and delinquent behavior is arguably one of the most well-researched topics in the discipline of criminology. Studies on this issue cover nearly 100 years, beginning with the pioneering work of Breckinridge and Abbott (1912), Healy and Bronner (1926), Shaw and McKay (1932), Hodgkiss (1933), and Glueck and Glueck (1950). Many studies have been published over the decades assessing the strength of this association. Researchers have also described the key methodological issues in this area of research, evaluated whether the importance of family structure varies according to circumstances, and have tried to explain the causal nature of the relationship by drawing upon prominent criminological theories (see Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Free, 1991; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; and Wells & Rankin, 1991, for overviews).

The literature is in general agreement that children from nontraditional families are at an elevated risk of delinquency when compared to children residing with both biological parents (Free, 1991; Wells & Rankin, 1991). The literature also shows that it is empirically and conceptually inadequate to measure family structure as a "broken/intact" dichotomy (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Wells & Rankin, 1986, 1991) and that the criminogenic influence of familial disruption may vary by circumstances (Kierkus & Baer, 2003; Kierkus & Hewitt, 2009; Price & Kunz, 2003). In addition, theoretical constructs drawn from social control and learning theories (Adlaf & Ivis, 1997; Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Rebellon, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1993) may help explain why family structure is related to misbehavior.

Some research has been conducted on the deleterious effects of cohabiting on children. Raley, Frisco, and Wildsmith (2005), for example, concluded that children living in maternal cohabiting

unions had lower high school graduation rates and enrollments at postsecondary educational institutions in comparison to their peers from other family structures. The study by Bulanda and Manning (2008) of adolescent girls found that cohabiting parent couples led to earlier sexual initiation and teen births. Studies by Nelson, Clark, and Acs (2001), as well as Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002), found that child well-being (as measured by cognitive performance and risk of behavioral problems) was elevated in cohabiting families. Most recently, Apel and Kaukinen (2008) reported that "youth in . . . cohabiting families are significantly more antisocial than their counterparts in nuclear households" (p. 55). The strongest criminogenic effect in this study was found when a biological father was living with a cohabiting partner.

Although some research examining the effects of cohabiting on the development of antisocial behavior has been published (see in particular, Brown, 2002, 2004; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Manning & Lamb, 2003), there is no consensus that cohabiting is universally related to antisocial behavior. Morrison (1998), for example, reported virtually no effect of postmarital cohabiting (as compared to remarriage) on a variety of behavioral problems. Brown (2004), meanwhile, reported a complex set of findings that varied by age and the nature of the cohabiting relationship. For instance, for young children (ages 6 to 11), living in a household with cohabiting biological parents was predictive of reduced well-being (i.e., emotional problems and school engagement). For older children (ages 12 to 17), the cohabiting of a biological parent with a stepparent was related to a reduction of well-being, although cohabiting by two biological parents was not (at least with respect to scholastic engagement).

Understanding the Cohabiting/Delinquency Relationship: Theoretical Frameworks

The extant literature suggests several possible explanations for the linkage between cohabiting and antisocial behavior. These explanations can be roughly grouped into a number of theoretical frameworks comprising the following perspectives: (a) family stress; (b) parental involvement; (c) community stress; and (d) selection.

Family Stress Models

Some researchers posit that children living in cohabiting families may be at increased risk of delinquency because this family structure places increased stress on everyone residing in the household (Crowder & Teachman, 2004). The sources of stress can be numerous, and may include "changes in residence, adjusting to new household members . . . conflict, economic stress, and ill defined rights and responsibilities of . . . family members" (Willettts & Maroules, 2004, p. 118). The "family stability" construct of Manning and Lamb (2003) further suggests that the stress of familial change may inhibit prosocial development, which in turn, could lead to a decline in a juvenile's well-being (see also Crowder & Teachman, 2004). In other cases, the transition into (and out of) a cohabiting family structure may also lead to family instability, and ultimately, delinquency (Raley et al., 2005).

Parental Involvement and Style Models

A second perspective focuses on parental involvement, and parenting style, to explain the relationship between cohabiting and antisocial behaviors. These arguments are variations of the traditional social control/parental attachment models explored by a number of authors (Adlaf & Ivis, 1997; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Essentially, some researchers believe that marriage impacts how invested parents become in raising children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003) and that "emotional attachments" between unmarried parents and children may

be weaker than those in traditional nuclear families (Willetts & Maroules, 2004). Similarly, Brown (2004) suggests that cohabiting families may be lacking in terms of effective monitoring and supervision. She also notes that cohabiting partners "often occupy ambiguous family roles characterized by little trust and authority" (Brown, 2004, p. 354). Manning and Lamb (2003) provide empirical evidence to support this position, stating that "slightly more negative parenting practices occur among cohabitating parents" (p. 878). Similarly, Apel and Kaukinen (2008) believe that "given the ambiguous nature of the relationship between cohabiting partners and non-biological children, parenting practices are more often negative" (p. 43).

Nonetheless, despite general agreement that parenting practices in cohabiting unions differ from those in "traditional" families, criminologists are uncertain whether parenting indicators can fully explain the effects of cohabiting on delinquency (Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). It is possible that "poor parenting" (however, measured) and cohabiting both exert independent effects on antisocial behavior, or that parenting quality variables may be more useful for explaining the link between certain types of cohabiting unions and delinquent behavior than others (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008).

Community Stress Models

This third theoretical framework examines the criminogenic elements of the community and its impact on delinquency. The criminological literature has found that negative influences of the community (including violence, poor housing, housing type, inferior schools, etc.) can result in the cultural transmissions of antisocial values, as well as low levels of social control and collective efficacy, which in turn produce increased levels of delinquency (Farrington & Welsh, 2007). It is also possible that community stressor-related variables may be related to the likelihood of children living in a cohabiting household (see, e.g., Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Willetts & Maroules, 2004). If so, the apparent link between cohabiting and delinquency may be *spurious* to community stress. Hence, while environmental explanations of delinquent behavior are not new (e.g., Shaw & McKay, 1969), their application within the context of the cohabitation literature is limited and constitutes a plausible avenue for exploration.

The Selection Model

Finally, some researchers propose a selection model to explain the relationship between cohabiting and delinquency. This approach suggests that delinquent children from cohabiting families are delinquent because they are subjected to criminogenic risk factors that predate their living arrangements (Willetts & Maroules, 2004). This argument, like the community stress model, suggests that any apparent criminogenic effects of cohabiting may actually be *spurious* to other variables. The key variable under the selection model may simply be socioeconomic status (SES). Manning (2002), as well as Manning and Lamb (2003), believe that cohabiting is disproportionately chosen by couples of lower SES (see also Willetts & Maroules, 2004). Brown (2004) further develops this basic argument by suggesting that cohabiting parents are more likely to have low levels of education; consequently, their income lags behind that of married couples. Moreover, Brown (2004) suggests that even where earning power is adequate, cohabiting families do not share resources as effectively as married households, which may result in "high levels of material hardship, including food and housing insecurity" (p. 353). Similarly, according to Apel and Kaukinen (2008), "what is clear is that ... children ... who share a home with two biological, married parents have the best financial outcomes. This ... in turn translates into several benefits ... with respect to ... behavioral well-being" (p. 43).

Methodological Issues in Prior Research

The review of the literature on cohabiting is somewhat limited because typical studies of delinquent behavior do not measure family structure in ways that allow researchers to determine whether a couple is actually cohabiting. Most traditional studies, for example, compare families with two biological parents (i.e., an “intact” family) to those headed by a single parent, stepparents, and other alternative structures (e.g., extended families, multi-generational families, foster care, etc.—see Wells & Rankin, 1986, 1991, and Kierkus & Baer, 2002, for extended discussions of these issues). Few studies, however, differentiate stepfamilies where parents are married from those who are simply living together (recent studies by Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Manning & Bulanda, 2006; Manning & Lamb, 2003; and Willetts & Maroules, 2004 are notable exceptions). Fewer studies still differentiate families where both *biological parents* are living together as a married couple from those in which the biological parents are present but unmarried. Hence, the most common operationalization of cohabiting used by previous researchers has involved the comparison of stepfamilies where a biological mother has remarried relative to simply living with (i.e., cohabiting) with a partner who is not the biological father of her offspring. In other words, most previous researchers have taken the “stepfamily” category from the traditional “broken homes literature” and divided it into two categories: remarried stepfamily and cohabiting stepfamily.

While a theoretically valuable comparison, these methodologies only explore one facet of the basic research question related to whether stability created by the institution of marriage can inhibit the development of delinquency. Thus, there is significant room for methodological refinement in this area. For example, the only studies that compared the effect of living with two married, biological parents versus two unmarried, biological parents are the series by Brown (2000, 2002, 2004) and the recent article published by Apel and Kaukinen (2008). However, Brown’s work (2000, 2002, 2004) does not look at juvenile delinquency (but instead focuses on the more general concept of “child well-being”) whereas the research by Apel and Kaukinen (2008) is limited because the authors collapsed 24 separate indicators of delinquency (ranging from school suspension and running away from home to aggravated assault and gang membership) into a single measure of “anti-social behavior.” This is problematic because previous research (Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Wells & Rankin, 1986, 1991) has found that the criminogenic effects of family structure can vary substantially based on the type of delinquency under consideration.

The Current Study

Data

Data for this research are taken from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) (Kilpatrick & Saunders, 1995). The NSA is a nationally representative, cross-sectional telephone survey of parents (or guardians), and youth aged 12 to 17 ($n = 4,023$), where the parent or guardian in each household provides demographic data, and general background information, about the target child (the child in the household with the most recent birthday among all siblings). The target child, meanwhile, provides information (with an adult’s consent) about his or her background, family life, community, peers, scholastic experiences, and antisocial behaviors (including delinquency and substance use). The current study is a secondary analysis of NSA data: it uses the full sample but is restricted to the variables relevant to this project.

Method

Based on the information available in the data set, this study draws on the existing research to formulate two plausible theoretical models that may explain the relationship between cohabiting and

delinquent development: the *family stress* and *community stress/selection* models. Based on the discussions presented by Manning and Lamb (2003), as well as Willetts and Maroules (2004), it is hypothesized that indicators of family stress may include factors such as high mobility (as indicated by frequent changes in place of residence and/or place of schooling), heavy drinking, and harsh discipline within the family (as responses to the frustrations of stress). Consistent with the concept of community stress, meanwhile, this study explores how cohabiting and delinquency are associated with criminogenic community elements such as violence, and drug use on the streets, and in the schools. Finally, consistent with the concept of selection, the analysis explores the possibility that low SES families may be disproportionately more likely to be involved in crime and to choose cohabiting as their family form. Unfortunately, because of limitations in the data, the current analysis is unable to explore the parenting involvement and style model.

Rather than comparing homes in which both biological parents are present (i.e., an “intact” home) to alternative family structures (e.g., single-parent families, stepparent families, neither natural parent families, etc.), this project focuses on the effect of marriage as the defining element of the family (Bumpass & Raley, 1995; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). The current analysis compares the effect of residing in a home where (a) two married parents are present to (b) alternative family forms where at least one parent is missing, or where the parents/guardians are present, but unmarried.

The general hypothesis is that the stability and commitment created by the institution of marriage will help insulate children from delinquency, regardless of whether parents are living with their biological offspring, their stepchildren, or a combination of both. For example, it is plausible that families where two unmarried parents are cohabiting with their biological offspring (i.e., a home that has traditionally be viewed as structurally “intact”) are still criminogenic. It is also posited that it may be less about who is living in the family home and more about the nature of the sociolegal relationships between the people raising children, which influences the development of delinquency.

Variables

Descriptive statistics for the variables used in this study are shown in Table 1.

Independent Variables

Family structure. This was the primary independent variable of interest. Families were classified as two-parent married (biological or step), two-parent cohabiting (biological or step), single parent, separated (for any reason, including death or divorce), and single parent, never married. Although this system of classification may mask theoretically relevant variation (e.g., there may be important differences between families where two biological parents are cohabiting and those where one or both of the cohabiting guardians is not a biological parent), this was the most comprehensive and diverse measure possible, given the measurement limitations of this data set.

Demographic controls. A dichotomous measure of gender and a continuous measure of age were used as standard demographic control variables. A race variable was also included, which was coded as a four-category measure (White, Black, Hispanic, and Other).

Family stress. Family stress is a 4-item measure of possible criminogenic risk factors existing *within* the family. It is used to test the hypothesis that cohabiting families may be less stable, less committed, or more troubled, as compared to married families. The family stress variables include (a) *harsh discipline* (a dichotomous indicator of whether the child has ever been beaten so hard that they reported “marks”), (b) *drinking problems* (a dichotomous indicator of whether anyone in the family has a serious drinking problem), (c) *new school* (a dichotomous measure of whether the child

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Sample of Adolescents ($n = 4,023$)

Independent Variables	Descriptive Statistics	
	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Family Structure		
Married	3,035	75.6
Cohabiting	142	3.5
Single separated	657	16.4
Single never married	182	4.5
Gender		
Male	2,018	50.2
Female	2,005	40.8
Age	$M = 14.64$	$SD = 3.65$
Race		
White	2,746	69.5
Black	572	14.5
Hispanic	390	9.9
Other	242	6.1
Community Drug Use		
Big problem	908	23.1
Problem	1,354	34.5
Small problem	1,092	27.8
No problem	571	14.5
Community Violence		
Big problem	311	7.8
Problem	1,161	29.1
Small problem	1,714	42.9
No problem	806	20.2
School Violence		
Big problem	225	5.6
Problem	1,089	27.2
Small problem	1,877	46.9
No problem	813	20.3
Family Income (\$)		
0–10K	295	7.8
10–20K	356	9.5
20–30K	610	16.2
30–40K	646	17.1
40–50K	515	13.7
50K+	1,339	35.6
Harsh Discipline		
Yes	384	9.6
No	3,633	90.4
Family Drinking		
Yes	562	14.0
No	3,457	86.0
New School		
Yes	1,028	25.6
No	2,993	74.4
New Home		
Yes	865	21.5
No	3,153	78.5

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Independent Variables	Descriptive Statistics	
	<i>n</i>	Percentage
General Delinquency		
Yes	417	10.4
No	3,606	89.6
Violent Crime		
Yes	396	9.9
No	3,615	90.1
Property Crime		
Yes	287	7.1
No	3,729	92.9
Substance Use		
Yes	881	21.9
No	3,140	78.1

has changed schools within the last year), (d) *new home* (a similar measure pertaining to moving into a new house). For the purpose of this study, each of the family stress measures was entered as individual variables in subsequent analyses. Had they been summed to form a composite index, the alpha reliability would have been .41.

Community stress. The community stress concept is composed of three separate measures: (a) *community drug use*, a measure of the extent to which drug abuse is perceived to be a problem in the community; (b), *community violence*, a measure assessing the extent to which violent behavior is perceived to be a problem in the community; and, (c) *school violence*, a measure of the extent to which violence is perceived to be problem in the specific school that the focal adolescent attends. Each of these variables could assume four different categories (“big problem,” “problem,” “small problem,” and “no problem”). Although these variables are entered individually in each of the regression models described below, if they had been summed to form an index, the alpha reliability would have been .57.

Selection. Next, household income (divided into six categories—see Table 1) is included in a block of possible confounding variables along with community stress. This variable is used as a measure of selection because the literature suggests that low-income families may be proportionately more likely to choose a cohabiting living arrangement (see Manning, 2002; Manning & Lamb, 2003).

Dependent Variables Four outcome variables were used in this study: (a) *general delinquency*; (b) *violent crime*; (c) *property crime*; and (d) *substance abuse*. The decision to use separate outcomes as opposed to a total count of delinquent acts (as in Apel & Kaukinen, 2008) was based on the prior studies by Wells and Rankin (1986, 1991) and Kierkus and Baer (2002), which empirically demonstrated that the impact of family structure on delinquency can vary based on the type of misbehavior under consideration.

Based on the NSA data, responses were dichotomized into either “yes” or “no” categories. Subjects were coded a “yes” on the property crime measure, if they had stolen anything (including a car) or broken into a locked building within the past year. They were rated a “yes” on the violent crime measure, if they had reported mugging or robbing anyone, assaulting anyone, or participating in gang fights within the past year. They were then coded a “yes” on the general delinquency indicator, if they reported involvement in *either* property or violent crime (but *not* substance use).

Finally, they were classified as a substance user, if they reported heavy drinking (five drinks or more at one sitting), smoking marijuana, or using inhalants, heroin, and/or cocaine. The decision to dichotomize the outcome variables (as opposed to computing indexes based on counts of how often a subject had engaged in the relevant behaviors) was based on the structural and empirical limitations of the data set being analyzed and the requirements of the analytic strategy.

Key Correlations Between Variables

Because many of the measures used in this study are categorical, nominal level variables, and because there is such a wide array of possible correlations between 11 independent and 4 dependent variables, a traditional Pearson correlation matrix is not presented. It should be noted, however, that moderate to strong ($>.20$), nonparametric correlations were noted between family structure and family income ($-.43$), race and family income ($-.23$), age and drugs in the community (.33), age and engaging in substance use (.36), changing schools and moving (.33), violence in the community and drugs in the community (.41), drugs in the community and substance use (.26), violence in the community and violence in the schools (.29), and drugs in the community and violence in the schools (.21). Predictably, the four different delinquent outcomes were also strongly correlated with one another, ranging from a correlation of .28 between violent delinquency and substance abuse to .76 between general delinquency and violent delinquency. All of the reported correlations were statistically significant at $p < .01$ or higher.

Analytic Strategy

The data were analyzed using logistic regression analysis, which is a standard choice for analysis of dichotomous outcome variables (see DeMaris, 1995). First, a model was estimated that examined the impact of family structure on the four different measures of delinquency (general delinquency, property crime, violent crime, and substance use), controlling for gender, race, and age. The goal of this model was to answer basic descriptive questions, such as “Is parental cohabiting related to different types of delinquency, and if so, what is the magnitude of the association?”

Next, this study examined whether family stress can explain why cohabiting is linked to delinquency. This model added the family stress measures (harsh discipline, family drinking problems, new school, and new home) to the basic set of estimators used in Model 1 (age, gender, race, and family structure). Based on the literature, it is plausible that the reason why cohabiting promotes delinquency is because cohabiting families experience higher than average levels of instability and turmoil, as compared to families where parents or guardians are legally married. This stress, in turn, may have negative developmental influences on the children living in cohabitating families, which could result in elevated levels of delinquency. If true, holding levels of family stress constant in a multivariate regression model should produce a reduction in the magnitude of the coefficients for family structure revealed by the first model. In other words, family stress should mediate the relationship between cohabiting and delinquency.

Finally, the community stress/selection model replicated the approach described above, except that a set of perceived community disorganization, crime, and family income indicators were substituted for the family stress indicators. In this context, it is plausible that the reason why cohabiting appears to be associated with delinquency is because children from such families may be more likely to live and go to school in neighborhoods characterized by high levels violence and drug use. They may also be more likely to grow up in impoverished homes. In other words, the criminogenic effect of cohabitation may be spurious to these factors. If so, a reduction in the magnitude of the coefficients from Step 1 of the analyses should appear. Or, stated another way, community stress and/or selection may moderate the relationship between cohabiting and delinquency.

Table 2. Basic Model: Family Structure and Four Measures of Delinquency

Model	Variable	B	SE	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B; Odds)
General delinquency* Model $\chi^2 = 154.91$, $p < .0001$ ($df = 6$) $N = 3,934$	Family structure			35.66	3	<.001	
	Cohabiting	1.03	.23	20.28	1	<.001	2.80
	Single separated	.57	.13	17.93	1	<.001	1.76
	Single never married	.62	.22	7.65	1	.006	1.85
Violent crime* Model $\chi^2 = 160.33$ $p < .0001$ ($df = 6$) $N = 3,938$	Family structure			26.83	3	<.001	
	Cohabiting	.75	.25	8.94	1	.003	2.11
	Single separated	.50	.14	13.35	1	<.001	1.65
	Single never married	.77	.21	13.21	1	<.001	2.16
Property crime* Model $\chi^2 = 153.89$ $p < .0001$ ($df = 6$) $N = 3,938$	Family structure			27.91	3	<.001	
	Cohabiting	1.21	.26	22.26	1	<.001	3.34
	Single separated	.50	.16	9.69	1	.002	1.64
	Single never married	.26	.32	.68	1	.408	1.30
Substance abuse [†] Model $\chi^2 = 214.24$ $p < .0001$ ($df = 6$) $N = 3,906$	Family structure			26.88	3	<.001	
	Cohabiting	.71	.20	12.45	1	<.001	2.03
	Single separated	.42	.10	16.57	1	<.001	1.52
	Single never married	.34	.20	2.74	1	.098	1.40

Note. In each model, the two-parent, legally married family is the omitted group (i.e., the comparison group).

*All control variables significant ($p < .05$).

[†]Gender and race nonsignificant; age significant ($p < .05$).

Findings

Basic Model: The Effects of Family Structure on Delinquency, Controlling for Gender, Race, and Age

Table 2 reports the key findings of the four different logistic regression models that used general delinquency, violent crime, property crime, and substance use as the dependent variables. Table 2 also reports the effect of family structure on delinquency, controlling for gender, race, and age. As is usual in logistic regression, the exponentiated values of the regression coefficients are reported in the final column of Table 2 (see Demaris, 1995). These values are then subjected to interpretation as the odds ratios.

The general delinquency analysis shows that children living in any nontraditional family structure (i.e., any structure other than the two-parent, married family) have higher odds of delinquency, controlling for the effects of gender, race, and age. Moreover, children from cohabiting families appear to be the most likely to engage in general delinquency (the odds are 2.8 times higher, relative to the comparison group: traditional married family). This odds ratio is also greater than those for the single separated, and single, never married, family structures (~ 1.8 and 1.9 , respectively).

When violent crime was considered as the outcome variable, the results differed somewhat from the other dependent variables analyzed in Table 2. In particular, all three nontraditional family structures were significant predictors of delinquency. For example, children raised in cohabiting households had a higher risk of engaging in violence, relative to children raised in two-parent married households (odds ratio ~ 2.1). When compared to the single parent separated and the single, never married categories, the disadvantage (as determined by the odds) of a cohabiting family structure was smaller. Children in single separated family structures had a higher odds of delinquency (ratio ~ 1.6) as compared to the traditional family structure, whereas children raised in single, never married families actually exhibited the highest odds ratio for violent delinquency (~ 2.2).

The analysis of family structure and delinquency in the context of property crime and substance abuse showed that children living in cohabiting households had the highest odds of engaging in these types of delinquent activities. For instance, for property crime, children had 3.3 times higher odds relative to the comparison group (traditional married families). Children from cohabiting families also had twice the odds of engaging in substance use in comparison to the reference category. The data also show that children raised in both types of single-parent families were more likely to engage in property crime and substance abuse than those raised in two-parent married families. However, the risks of engaging in these behaviors were lower in these family structures than in the cohabiting family structure (and in fact did not reach statistical significance in the single, never married group).

Explanatory Models: Can Family Stress and Community Stress/Selection Explain the Relationship Between Cohabiting and Delinquent Behavior?

The models shown in Table 3 added variables from the family stress, and the community stress/selection perspectives (then all of them together, in a composite model) to the basic models described in Table 2. This analysis was conducted to explore whether (a) family stress can explain why cohabiting leads to, or has an effect on, delinquency (the family stress model), which would represent a mediating effect; (b) the effect of cohabiting on delinquency may be partially spurious to (i.e., moderated by) the variables in the community stress/selection model; or (c) the effect of cohabiting on delinquency is partially mediated by family stress and partially moderated by community stress/selection (the composite model).

If these models have explanatory power, a significant reduction in the magnitude of the global coefficient for family structure (and particularly for the cohabiting category) should be seen in these analyses. Significant control, mediating, and moderating variables for each model estimated are reported in Table 3. However, for the sake of parsimony, complete regression statistics for each analysis are not presented. Instead, Table 3 focuses on the changes in key coefficients.

With respect to general delinquency, Table 3 shows that the family stress and the community stress/selection perspectives cannot completely explain why children from nontraditional families are more likely to engage in delinquent activities. For example, the odds ratio for cohabiting remains above 2.0 ($p < .001$) after the mediating influence of family stress has been accounted for (as do the significantly elevated odds ratios for single-parent families). Similarly, holding constant community stress/selection only reduces the cohabiting odds ratio from 2.8 ($p < .001$) in the basic model (i.e., Table 2) to slightly more than 2.3 ($p < .001$).

After all of the individual mediators and moderators have been accounted for in the composite model, children living with two cohabiting parents have slightly less than 1.8 times the odds of engaging in general delinquency, relative to children living with two married parents (the reference category). Although this represents a substantial reduction from the original odds ratio of 2.8, the "cohabiting effect" remains statistically significant ($p < .05$). Similarly, while the overall Wald statistic for family structure has also declined substantially from 35.66 ($p < .001$) in the descriptive model (Table 2) to 8.44 ($p < .05$), here, it does remain statistically significant. This suggests that family structure continues to "matter," even after the effects of both of the hypothesized theoretical explanations have been statistically considered. As seen in Table 3, many of the mediating (new home, harsh punishment, and family drinking) and moderating (community drugs and violent school) variables have statistically significant effects on general delinquency in the composite model. It is also worth noting that an important moderating effect is noted in the single, never married group, where accounting for community stress/selection reduces the coefficient to statistical nonsignificance (this suggests that the criminogenic effect of living with a single, never married, parent may be spurious to community stress/selection).

Table 3. Accounting for the Influence of Family Stress, Controlling for Community Stress/Selection

Effect of Family Structure on:	Basic Model	Family Stress Model	Community Stress/Selection Model	Composite Model
General delinquency				
F. Structure Wald	35.66***	15.49***	16.04***	8.44*
Cohabiting	2.80***	2.05***	2.31***	1.74*
S. Separated	1.76***	1.48***	1.55**	1.43*
S. Never married	1.85**	1.53*	1.50	1.54
Model χ^2/df	154.91 (6)***	353.95 (12)***	320.43 (18)***	468.85 (22)***
Other significant predictors	Gender, Race, Age	Gender, Race, Age, New Home, New School, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking	Gender, Race, Community Drugs, Community Violence, Violent School	Gender, Race, New Home, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking, Community Drugs, Violent School
Violent Crime				
F. Structure Wald	26.83***	11.60**	10.58**	7.31
Cohabiting	2.11**	1.50	1.71*	1.26
S. Separated	1.65***	1.37*	1.44*	1.30*
S. Never Married	2.16***	1.86**	1.86*	1.91*
Model χ^2/df	160.33 (6)***	335.57 (12)***	332.48 (18)***	453.59 (22)***
Other significant predictors	Gender, Race, Age	Gender, Race, Age, New Home, New School, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking	Gender, Race, Community Drugs, Violent School	Gender, Race, Age, New Home, Family Drinking, Harsh Punishment, Community Drugs, Community Violence, Violent School
Property Crime				
F. Structure Wald	27.91***	13.98**	18.04***	10.91**
Cohabiting	3.34***	2.52***	3.05***	2.45**
S. Separated	1.64**	1.41*	1.49*	1.42
S. Never Married	1.30	1.07	1.10	1.11
Model χ^2/df	153.89 (6)***	282.76 (12)***	249.20 (18)***	339.44 (22)***
Other significant predictors	Gender, Race, Age	Gender, Race, Age, New Home, New School, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking	Gender, Race, Community Drugs, Violent School	Gender, Race, New Home, New School, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking, Community Drugs

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Effect of Family Structure on:		Basic Model	Family Stress Model	Community Stress/Selection Model	Composite Model
Substance Use	F. Structure	26.89***	10.22*	22.52***	13.32***
	Cohabiting	2.03***	1.61*	1.93**	1.60*
	S. Separated	1.52***	1.30**	1.62***	1.48**
	S. Never Married	1.40	1.22	1.51	1.46
	Model χ^2/df	214.24 (6)***	353.097 (12)***	405.33 (18)***	501.68 (22)***
	Other significant predictors	Race, Age	Race, Age, New Home, New School, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking	Gender, Race, Age, SES, Community Drugs, Community Violence	Gender, Race, Age, SES, Harsh Punishment, Family Drinking, Community Violence, Community Drugs

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

The mechanisms explored in this study seem to have the most explanatory power (in a statistical sense) in terms of understanding the relationship between family structure and violence. In the basic model (Table 2), there was a strong association between all three types of nontraditional family structure and violent delinquency. However, after the hypothesized mediating and moderating mechanisms have been accounted for, the key relationship between cohabiting and this type of misbehavior is reduced to statistical nonsignificance (and the odds ratio declines from ~ 2.1 [$p < .01$] to 1.3). Furthermore, in the composite model, the strength of the overall relationship between family structure and violent crime is also substantially reduced: the Wald falls from 26.83 ($p < .001$) to 7.31 (n.s.).

When examined in greater detail, it appears that the explanation for these overall reductions is partially attributable to the mediating influence of family stress and partially to the moderating influence of community stress/selection. Under the family stress model, the overall Wald for family structure declined from 26.83 ($p < .001$) to 11.60 ($p < .01$) and the odds ratio for cohabiting became statistically nonsignificant (declining from 2.11 to 1.50). Accounting for community stress/selection had an even greater effect on the overall Wald statistic for family structure (reducing it to 10.58, $p < .01$) but a marginally smaller effect on the odds ratio for cohabiting (reducing it to 1.71, $p < .05$). Moving to a new home or a new school, experiencing harsh punishment, familial drinking, the presence of community drug use, and violence in the community and the schools all helped account for these changes to the family structure and cohabiting coefficients.

The results of the property crime analyses were similar to those for general delinquency. Accounting for family stress reduces the odds ratio for cohabiting from more than 3.3 to just over 2.5, whereas controlling for community stress/selection makes it decline to 3.1 (all three of these coefficients were significant at $p < .001$). The best evidence of moderation and mediation is found in the composite model where the overall Wald statistic falls from 27.91 ($p < .001$) to 10.91 ($p < .01$). Children from cohabiting families, who had more than 3.3 times the odds of engaging in property crime in the basic model, now have less than 2.5 times the odds of doing so ($p < .01$). Most of this decline appears to be attributable to the mediating effect of the family stress variables (new home, new school, harsh punishment, and family drinking). It is also notable that after all of the mediating and moderating variables have been accounted for, children from single-parent homes are no more likely to engage in property crime than those from traditional, married families.

Finally, the results of the substance use model are similar to those of the property crime model. Although in this case, it is clear that most of the "explanation" for delinquency is attributable to the mediating effect of family stress. In the family stress model, the overall Wald statistic for family structure declined from 26.89 ($p < .001$) to 10.22 ($p < .05$) and the odds ratio for cohabiting declined from ~ 2.0 ($p < .001$) to ~ 1.6 ($p < .05$). The family stress variables (new home, new school, harsh punishment, and family drinking) appear to play a role in helping us understand *why* cohabiting may be related to this form of delinquent behavior.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has contributed to the existing literature on cohabiting and delinquency by (a) using an underinvestigated operationalization of cohabiting; (b) exploring a number of theoretical explanations for the "cohabiting effect" that have been infrequently tested by previous researchers; and (c) focusing on several distinct delinquent outcome measures. Because so few studies have been published on this issue, this study is also useful and important in the context of establishing whether the findings reported by other researchers are consistent across time, place, and social groupings. To this end, the criminogenic effect of cohabiting on four different types of delinquency (general, violent crime, property crime, and substance abuse) was examined using a nationally representative data set not previously used to investigate this issue.

The analysis revealed that parental cohabiting is a significant predictor of delinquent behavior. That is, living in a family where the parents (biological or otherwise) are living together (but not married) can place children at greater risk of all four kinds of delinquency relative to living in a home headed by married parents and/or a single-parent family structure. In terms of explaining the criminogenic effect of family structure (focusing on cohabiting), this study also makes a contribution. Although the community stress/selection and the family stress perspectives, as well as variables from both mechanisms combined, could not *completely* explain the deleterious effects of cohabiting, substantial evidence of mediation and moderation was nevertheless found. In particular, the analysis revealed that family stress appears to substantially mediate the relationship between cohabiting and general delinquency, violent delinquency and substance use (statistical evidence for mediation with respect to property crime was weaker). In practice, this suggests that a possible reason why children from cohabiting unions engage in these delinquent activities is because they are more likely to be exposed to frequent moves (new home and new school), harsh punishment, and problem drinking within the family.

The analysis also revealed that community stress/selection can substantially moderate the relationship between cohabiting, general delinquency, and violent crime (evidence for moderation in the property crime and substance use models was weaker). In other words, part of the family structure/general delinquency/violent crime relationship may be spurious to the effects of variables such as community drug use, community violence, and violence in the schools. That is, it may simply be the case that cohabiting families are more likely to settle in such criminogenic environments.

Still, in general, substantial direct effects of cohabiting on delinquency remained after controlling for all of the possible intervening and confounding variables considered in this analysis. In this regard, the findings and conclusions are broadly consistent with those of Apel and Kaukinen (2008, pp. 55–56), who reported that the explanatory models estimated in their study did “a laudable job of explaining” why adolescents in certain types of nontraditional families were more likely to be delinquent but did “considerably less well at explaining” the delinquency of youth in cohabiting households. This suggests that a substantial amount of research remains to be done in this area. Investigations that focus on the possible mediating effects of other family function/parenting style variables, such as parental supervision, attachment, and delinquent peer relationships (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Rebellon, 2002) are most likely to be fruitful. Exploring the intervening role of school-based variables (e.g., commitment to school and involvement in after school activities) may also be a useful approach (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008).

Nevertheless, this study has confirmed the basic hypothesis presented earlier: it seems that understanding the nature of the sociolegal relationships between family members may be as important as knowing who is physically living in the family home when one is trying to understand the delinquent development of adolescent children. In fact, this analysis suggests that it may be more important. Just living with “Mom and Dad” (even if they are one’s biological parents) may not be enough to inhibit delinquency if “Mom and Dad” are not married.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this research suggest that scholars and policy makers should undertake further investigation of the “marriage effect.” It is possible that the additional stability created by the institution of marriage may have positive consequences (vis-à-vis a lack of delinquency) for adolescent children. However, because of the limitations of this study, this statement should not be considered definitive. The purpose of this final section is to discuss these limitations.

Some obvious weaknesses of the current analysis include the manner in which the key independent variable (family structure) and the proposed mediating and moderating variables were measured. In addition, the inability of this study to consider parental attachment (and other parenting

style variables) as explanatory premises, or to account for possible genetic factors as confounding variables (Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; Wright & Beaver, 2005), limited the current authors' ability to draw causal inferences from the results. The cross-sectional nature of the data also created a threat to validity in this regard.

It would also have been useful to separate two-biological parent married families, two-biological parent cohabiting families, married stepfamilies, and cohabiting stepfamilies when estimating the empirical models. Unfortunately, the indicators included in the NSA data set did not allow for such a precise subdivision. Replication of this analysis using a data set that permits this type of operationalization would enable researchers to investigate whether forgoing the institution of marriage is damaging in all situations, or only in cases where some, or all, of the adolescents in a family are not biologically related to one or more of the parents.

It would also have been useful to explore a series of improved explanatory models, in addition to the family stress and the community stress/selection indicators tested in this study. Unfortunately, the NSA did not include a comprehensive set of social control/parental attachment indicators that would have permitted the creation of the constructs needed for such an analysis. Hence, rather than creating proxy constructs with questionable face validity (based on the limited indicators that were available), the decision was made to address these issues in a subsequent study. Moreover, the NSA contain the variables necessary to test the hypothesis that the causal influence of parenting on delinquency (in general) may be moderated by genetic factors, as recent research has proposed (Beaver et al., 2008; Wright & Beaver, 2005).

With respect to the limitations discussed in the previous two paragraphs, it should be noted that the recently published study by Apel and Kaukinen (2008) *did* address some of these concerns. However, because these researchers did not evaluate their hypotheses separately by type of delinquency, something that previous meta-analysis (Wells & Rankin, 1986, 1991) has shown to be important, this study nonetheless makes an important contribution to understanding the current issue.

Finally, as Apel and Kaukinen (2008) suggest, it would clearly have been useful to explore all of the issues and hypotheses presented in this article using a longitudinal data set (see also Carlson, 2006 and Manning & Bulanda, 2008). In particular, it is unclear whether the assumptions about the causal sequences presented in the family stress model are correct. It was assumed that alternative family structures (including cohabiting) might lead to harsh discipline and increased familial mobility (as measured using changes in place of residence and schooling). Yet, the current study could not account for the possibility that at least some of these things could also lead to changes in family structure. For instance, it is plausible that overly harsh (perhaps, even abusive) disciplinary techniques, or severe drinking problems, on the part of one parent may make the other parent reluctant to enter into the institution of marriage. If so, the causal sequence envisioned here could be reversed. Replicating this analysis using panel data would help clarify the nature of such relationships.

The current authors do not believe that any of these limitations are serious enough to render the findings and conclusions of this study meaningless. Instead, readers should simply view this study as one of the series of important first steps that will help initiate a line of inquiry with significant scholarly and practical policy applications.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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