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PREVIEW

PARENTAL SUPPORT AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY:

A TEST OF SOCIAL SUPPORT THEORY

A Dissertation submitted to the
Division of Graduate Studies and Research
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Criminal Justice
of the college of Education

1995

by

John Paul Wright

B.S., Indiana State University, 1990

M.S., Indiana State University, 1991

Committee: Francis T. Cullen (Chair)
John D. Wooldredge
Patricia Van Voorhis
Paula J. Dubeck (Reader)

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UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

2 January _____, 19⁹⁶_____

I, John Paul Wright,

hereby submit this as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

in Criminology

It is entitled Parental Support and Juvenile Delinquency

A Test of Social Support Theory

Approved by:

Francis T. Cullen

John D. Luedtke

Patricia Van Voorhis

**PARENTAL SUPPORT AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY:
A TEST OF SOCIAL SUPPORT THEORY**

John Paul Wright

Abstract

Over the past decade, criminologists have focused considerable attention on the relationship between family life and crime by youths. Much of the theory and research asserts that juvenile waywardness is produced by a dearth in direct control by parents over youths and by a range of risk factors, such as parental conflict and family disruption. This dissertation argues, however, that the existing research has largely neglected the effects of a salient family factor: the extent to which parents provide children with "social support," including affection, "quality time," and resources.

The social support perspective is tested through the use of a large, national probability sample of 1775 children and their parents. Measures were developed that included parents' reports of their child's delinquency, direct parental controls, parental supports, and multiple family risk factors.

Multiple analytic strategies were employed. OLS regression, logistic regression, analysis of interaction terms, and structural equations modeling produced similar results. First, family risk factors had a consistent positive relationship to delinquency. Second, the direct parental control scale was positively related to delinquency, with the

results much more variable over different tests. Third, the parental support construct was consistently and inversely related to delinquency. Moreover, in tests for variable interactions, parental supports appeared capable of reducing the effects of family risk factors. The path models also showed that most family structural risk factors have their effects largely through the support construct. Lastly, direct parental controls were shown to be effective only when coupled with parental supports.

The final section discusses the impact of macro-level changes in society on parental supports. Most notably, reductions in time accorded to parents, due primarily to longer work hours and less time off, are having a significant impact on the ability of parents to provide support to their offspring. The cost of attenuated support is the involvement of youth in delinquent activities.

PREVIEW

The completion of this project represents an important milestone in my life. As I reflect on the sacrifice that it demanded I am quickly reminded of those who have supported me and therefore made this moment possible.

To the woman in the yellow shirt who captured my heart years ago, I dedicate this project. You have taught me that which I did not learn as a child and to you I am forever indebted.

My three children, LaChelle, Kassi, and Whitnie, have served as a source of inspiration and a pool of unconditional love. Their passion for life is enviable; their optimism promising.

Few in life are as fortunate as I. My teacher turned quickly into my mentor, then into my advisor, and somewhere along the line into my friend. Dr. Cullen's patience and uncompromising dedication has in large part been responsible for transforming an undisciplined thinker into a junior academic. As a teacher he instructed me on the thoughts of giants past and present. His mentorship made me aware of the art of the profession. From his friendship, however, I developed an appreciation for the truth that waits to be remembered: People matter. Dr. Cullen, I offer you my sincere and most humble thanks.

Dr. Van Voorhis and Dr. Wooldredge were also instrumental in the development of this dissertation. They met short time lines and offered invaluable advice and criticism. More importantly, they extended to me a sense of professional respect that I will always remember.

Dr. Dubeck's contributions were likewise valuable and meaningful. Her willingness to serve on short notice and to read the document under tight time constraints helped to transform the process from an onerous chore to a pleasant task.

The Division of Criminal Justice, particularly Dr. Latessa, provided me with financial support for two years. More importantly, numerous opportunities to grow and explore were presented daily. Truly, the department offers a habitat for ideas and the training necessary for one to realize their potential.

Finally, to my grandparents who never stopped believing in me, I hope your dreams are realized. Until we meet again.

**PARENTAL SUPPORT AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY:
A TEST OF SOCIAL SUPPORT THEORY**

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

PARENTAL SUPPORT AND CRIME

Over the last several decades the American family has been in a state of flux. Periodically, those interested in the condition of the family sound the alarm at what they see as unhealthy or misdirected change. An increase is detected in the number of families headed solely by a female, child abuse rates grow to intolerable proportions, or the percent of children being raised in day-care centers climbs unabated. The alarms generate public and political calls for reform and assistance. And for a brief period the importance of family is discussed and policies are debated; inevitably the family unit is reaffirmed as the most basic social building block. Concern, however, is short-lived as the next crisis emerges.

Criminological attention paid to families has followed much the same course, peaking when the social context generates interest and all but disappearing when social concerns evaporate. For example, after a brief period of investigation into family correlates of delinquency by the Gluecks (1950), criminological attention was turned away from family matters and focused on more political interests dealing with juvenile gangs, class and gender analysis, and labeling (Sykes and Cullen 1992). Studying families fell into professional disrepute, not because of a lack of empirical

support, but because of a climate that rewarded research into more immediate social concerns.

The family has again reemerged as a salient issue in criminological analysis. Instead of following the political winds, however, criminologists have successfully traced indelible correlates of crime and delinquency back to early life experiences, resulting in a new importance being placed on family characteristics.

Perhaps the piece of evidence most responsible for this reevaluation is the continued finding that behavioral patterns are stable over the life course. An array of research findings indicate that behavioral repertoires are set early in life and, once set, are relatively stable across the life course and through various social situations, such as marriage or employment. The connection between early life experiences and stable behavioral patterns points directly to the family. Thus, it seems that this time research findings are driving continued curiosity in the family, and not the political winds.

There is additional evidence, however, that points to families as important causal agents of delinquency. A growing body of research has established a range of "family risk" variables; that is, research has identified, and to some degree classified, a variety of factors that, if present, increase the likelihood of delinquency (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1986).

Stable individual differences in the propensity to offend, or what Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) term "low self-control," and a recognition of an array of empirical risk factors linked to the family environment, have initiated some of the most creative and empirically based theorizing criminology has seen for some time. Colvin and Pauly's (1983) "structural Marxist theory," Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of informal social control, Hagan's (1989) work on "power-control," and Gottfredson and Hirschi's influential "general theory of crime" stand as testaments to the new focus and theoretical attention paid to family functioning.

Yet this examination, with its new theories, powerful correlates, and logical interconnections, has largely been interpreted from a control theory perspective. Each of the theories just mentioned, for example, place theoretical priority on "direct control"--that is, on the capacity of parents to supervise, discipline, and punish effectively their children. Indeed, a casual glance through the writings of these authors would leave the impression that other family factors--such as parental love, acceptance, and support--are unimportant in curbing or eliminating delinquency; that as long as a child is supervised, and punishment accorded when rules have been violated, the child will develop into a conforming adult.

In contrast, this dissertation attempts to take a new look at the role the family plays in juvenile delinquency.

With a change of the theoretical lens, this project will assess, through the use of a national data set, the impact on delinquency of parental supports. At issue is whether parental support of adolescent children--that is, parental behaviors directed toward the child that indicate that they are loved and cared for--can compete with or condition the effects of direct control; or as modern criminological theory argues, is control the most salient family variable? The empirical analysis also includes a number of family factors that research has identified as increasing the risk of delinquent involvement.

In the pages ahead, I examine the family literature from a range of academic disciplines. Particularly, I review a substantial body of evidence that details and classifies empirical family risk factors, how these risk factors affect a broad range of behavioral outcomes, and how this literature has remained largely atheoretical. Moreover, I argue that social support has not been given adequate, systematic theoretical attention as it pertains to risk.

Following the section on family risk factors, I examine contemporary criminological theory and how it relates to the family. Foreshadowing what is to come, I trace specifically the evolution of the idea of direct parental controls and show how this once obscure variable has risen in prominence and today dominates much theoretical discussion surrounding families and crime. Thereafter, I detail how, by emphasizing

direct controls, theorists have left unexamined those variables that can account for variation in a wide range of outcomes, from academic achievement to delinquency.

In the next section, I introduce social support theory and examine the literature already available from other disciplines. More precisely, I show how supportive social relations are critical to healthy human development, and how modern criminological theory has ignored this fact.

Next I attempt to show how parental support functions to limit delinquency, how support may condition parental controls, and how support may mitigate criminogenic risk. Moreover, I test a structural equations model that links parental supports to social structural variables. Lastly, I list five hypotheses to be tested in this dissertation.

If theoretical expectations are realized through the empirical analysis, much contemporary thinking surrounding families and crime will be called into question. The current emphasis on direct parental controls, for example, may turn out to be overstated, misstated, or flatly wrong. If so, a new level of complexity will be introduced into family studies. Furthermore, by bringing to bear a number of previously defined family risk factors to compete and interact with parental supports, support may be realized as both a cause of delinquency (a lack of support) and a mitigating factor in delinquency (a presence of support).

Family Factors and the Risk of Delinquency

An often overlooked fact within sociological analyses of crime is that the majority of human development occurs within a family setting. It is within the family that children encounter their first social relationships, develop trust, and experience support. And for a number of years, children are legally restrained to reside in their birth family, their desires to be elsewhere restricted. For the majority of children and parents, this arrangement may be as agreeable as it is unexamined. However, some families present less than favorable opportunities for the child to develop. These families have children who do not experience trust or feel the positive strokes of support.

Families differ in respect to the environments they create. Certain families, for example, face many more obstacles than others and lead chaotic and oftentimes deplorable lives. The sometimes stark contrast between families has led some researchers to assess various family factors, such as family conflict, and their relationship to delinquency.

Perhaps the most important assessment of family risk factors to date is that of Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber's (1986) comprehensive meta-analytic review of family correlates to crime. Their analysis was not a simple "vote counting" literature review in which the number of study outcomes showing an effect on delinquency were tallied and compared.

Instead, they converted the statistical results of numerous studies to a common metric and then aggregated their results for like studies. Known as a "meta-analysis," this method of assessment allows for the comparison of studies using various methodologies. Thus, the statistical aggregation of study results provides researchers with the ability to control for various methodological factors, such as differing sample sizes. In the end, however, a common metric is produced that allows researchers to evaluate the substantive importance of various factors across numerous studies.

Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber organized the array of family factors into four broad paradigms: parental neglect, family conflict, parental deviance, and the family disruption paradigm. First, the "neglect paradigm" focuses on variables that tap into the amount of time parents spend with their children, either directly supervising them or indirectly through the sharing of activities. Variables in this paradigm have also been used to measure the attachment between parent and child and between child and parent. Second, the "conflict paradigm" examines the degree to which there are arguments between parents and between parents and children, and between siblings. Third, the "parental deviance" paradigm included measures of parental criminality, aggression, and deviant values. Fourth, the "disruption paradigm" includes studies on the effects of parental health and of parental absence, either from death or divorce.

Using Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber's topology as a guideline I will, in the next section, examine the literature on family risk factors in more detail.

A Review of Family Risk Factors

Supervision and Involvement. In the Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber review, variables from the neglect paradigm were most strongly and consistently related to delinquency. Specifically, a lack of parental-child involvement, parental rejection, and a lack of parental supervision emerged as powerful predictors of delinquency. For example, they compiled twenty-nine analyses that assessed parental involvement variables. Of the twenty-nine outcomes, twenty-two were statistically significant and positively associated with delinquency. The results were stronger when analyses of official records were used rather than self-reports. In terms of the overall magnitude of the effect, however, parental involvement was strongly related to delinquency regardless of the methodology.

Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber also reviewed nine studies that contained eleven analyses of the degree and extent to which parents monitor and supervise their children. Ten of the eleven analyses were positively associated and significant. Moreover, the strength of the results mirrored those found for the involvement variables. Again, the results were stronger in studies using official records rather than self-report scales.

In total, eighty-five percent of the analyses composing the neglect paradigm were significant and in the predicted theoretical direction. It thus appears that parents who spend little time with their children or who do not monitor or supervise adequately increase the likelihood that their offspring will engage in delinquent acts.

In addition to Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber's review, a range of studies have appraised the effects of parental supervision on delinquency. For example, Patterson and his colleagues (1980) at the Oregon Social Learning Center argue that a lack of supervision during early adolescence increases the likelihood that youths will associate with delinquent peers, which in turn increases the chances of delinquency. Parental monitoring and supervision therefore accord limited opportunities for youths 1) to engage directly in delinquency and 2) to develop delinquent friends. Findings in favor of this model have been rather consistent (Patterson 1980; Loeber and Dishion 1983; Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber 1984; Loeber and Dishion 1984; Patterson and Dishion 1985; Patterson 1986; Snyder and Patterson 1987; Wright and Wright 1994).

Parents, however, do more than supervise and monitor the activities of their progeny. To varying degrees, parents are involved in the lives of their kids, provide praise and encouragement, and remain diligent of their welfare. Parental involvement encompasses a range of behaviors. Andry (1960), for example, found that compared to delinquent youths

nondelinquent kids were significantly more likely to go on "outing" with their parents. The Gluecks (1950) found that families of delinquents were less concerned for the welfare of their kids than families of nondelinquents. Similarly, Reid and Hendriks (1973) found that families of stealers and aggressive children were less positive and displayed fewer friendly behaviors toward their children. In relationships with children, families of delinquents have also been found to display less supportive communications (Alexander 1973), share fewer evenings out (Slocum and Stone 1963), and to be less confiding (Dentler and Monroe 1961).

The antithesis of involvement and supervision can be conceptualized as parental rejection. Direct tests of the effects of parental rejection on delinquency date back to the Gluecks' (1950) original work. The Gluecks found that parents of delinquents were frequently cold and hostile to their children and cared little for their welfare. Parental rejection has also been a factor associated with lying (Stouthamer-Loeber and Loeber 1986), serious criminality (McCord 1984), the development of a sociopathic personality (Robbins 1966), and self-reports and mother-reports of child delinquency (Simcha-Fagan et al. 1975). According to Wright and Wright (1994:18), "parental rejection appears to be among the most powerful predictors of juvenile delinquency."

The failure to distinguish between supervision and involvement often distorts the fact that parents more involved

in the lives of their children are also more likely to supervise and monitor their children, and are less rejecting as well. There is a conceptual link between involvement, supervision, parental rejection, and support: the support construct envelopes these variables; in other words, supportive parents are less rejecting of their kids, supervise and monitor appropriately, and are involved in the lives of their children. Yet throughout the entire criminological literature, few if any references are made to the importance of parental support, even as it relates to parental involvement. Nonetheless, it appears that a lack of supportive parents may increase the likelihood of delinquency.

The Structure of Risk. Much research has also been aimed at exploring family composition, structure, and the timing and course of significant events, such as the death of parents. Moreover, a significant amount of investigation has explored how families create and react to conflict, how familial relationships propel or retard offspring into or away from delinquency, and how the quality of these relationships affect an array of behavioral outcomes. These factors thus delineate a two-pronged approach taken by family researchers: one element focuses on the structure of the family, while the other element focuses on the quality of family interactions. In their review, for example, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber classified separately those variables that dealt with family structure (disruption paradigm) and those variables that dealt

with conflict within the home. Recently, however, an appreciation of the overlapping nature of structural and interactional elements has developed.

Perhaps the most studied structural family correlate to delinquency is that of "broken homes." Although the term itself is filled with moral overtones, it nonetheless represents what many in society see as antithetical to the normal family unit. Thirty percent of today's families are headed by a single-parent (Kamerman and Kahn 1995). When this relatively recent social change is coupled to the extraordinary attention paid to crime by this nation, the correlation between family structure and crime appears almost commonsensical.

The empirical evidence on family structure and its relationship to crime, however, paints a more complicated and incomplete picture. A number of studies have found a direct effect of single-parent families on crime (Gibson 1969; Rutter 1971; Canter 1982; Rankin 1983; Matsueda and Heimer 1987). Loeber et al. (1991) found, for example, that delinquency correlated significantly with family structure. They reported that adolescents in single-parent families experienced a more rapid escalation in offending than their counterparts in two-parent homes, who subsequently desisted from offending much quicker (Wright and Wright 1994). Furthermore, in another meta-analytic review, Wells and Rankin (1991) summarize the findings of fifty studies on the effects of single-parent